



Thrive in Ministry

Creating a Healthier Environment

Three Questions:

How many pastors have you known over the years who have left ministry? Do you know their reasons for leaving ministry?

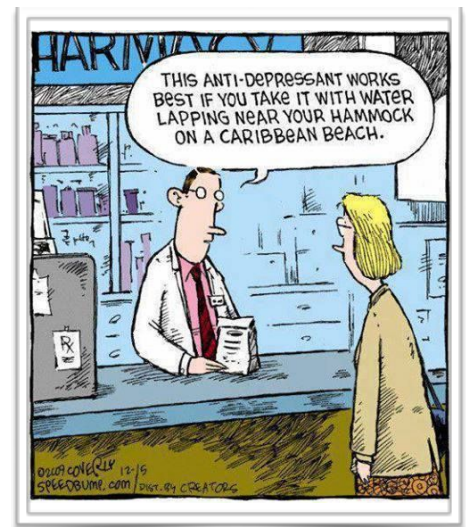
What is the biggest cause of stress in your ministry right now? Name the top two or three (you might even know them by name).

What one step can you take this week that will help you have a healthier environment?

"Another of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'" (Matt. 8:21-22 NRSV)

When Jesus called his disciples to follow him, it was a life altering, values altering calling. Paul (ok, Saul) experienced this call on the road to Damascus. For the rest of his life, he was obedient to this calling and called others to follow Jesus. Paul would recount the high cost of his calling (2 Cor. 11:16-33). He would also write, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2:19-20).

When serving as a pastor in America, you might not be flogged or stoned, it is still a difficult calling. In their book, *Pastors in Transition*, Hoge and Wenger shared the staggering numbers of clergy who leave ministry and their reasons for doing so. Research



"A person's adaptiveness has been exceeded when the intensity of his anxious response to stress impairs his own functioning or the functioning of those with whom he is emotionally connected." -Michael Kerr

shows that 10-15% of pastors leave ministry entirely, while as many as 40% no longer serve in local church ministry within 20 years of ordination. Conflict is a key contributing factor to many leaving local church ministry. (Hoge & Wenger, 2005, pp. 28-29) Others remain in local church ministry, but struggle with depression, alcoholism, and burnout. A small but growing number see no way out but suicide.

What if pastors could create a healthier environment for their ministry and their family. A

"healthy environment" is not the same as a "stress-free" environment. Pastors are encouraged to focus on those areas of their ministry over which they have control, not expend energy attempting to force others to change.

Every pastor has different capacities for dealing with the strain and stress of ministry? A healthy environment refers to the strategizing of ways to keep stress and strain at a level that is not harmful or overwhelming.

Overwhelmed

What happens when people are confronted by a high level of stress, anxiety, or conflict? Siebert describes physical reaction, “The adrenal glands instantly prepare your body for emergency action. You blood sugar becomes elevated, and your heart rate speeds up to pump blood to your muscles The pupils in your eyes widen, you breathe harder and faster, and you perspire.” (Siebert, 2005, pp. 36–37) He describes this as the “alarm reaction.” Everyone experiences this alarm reaction from time to time. When this overwhelming level of stress becomes the norm, people experience emotional exhaustion and burnout. It can also lead to a myriad of health issues.

Are clergy more susceptible to stress? Of course not, but pastors do face numerous challenges that can lead to high levels of stress and even alarm response: high role expectations, ambiguity between family and congregation responsibilities, boundary invasions, public speaking, low pay, counseling, and even the erosion of personal beliefs. Following Jesus, much less being a pastor, does not exempt one from the consequences of continuous stress.

A Healthier Environment

Physical health, relationships, response to anxiety, times of rest, and life with God are included in this phrase “healthy environment.”

Values and Priorities: Simply being mindful of what truly matters in life is often the first step for many pastors. This requires that pastors take time away from the urgent demands and distractions of ministry and reflect on what they value most. Are these values reflected in the way in which they spend their time. This time of reflection can be filled with shame and recrimination for their failure. If, however, pastors pair this practice with self-compassion they can have a healthy process. It is also important for pastors to be able to differentiate their values from the demands of others. (Kerr, 1988, p. 10)

Awareness of Personal Stress Response: Pastors must be clear about how stress and emotional strain impacts them and their family. Not everyone adapts to stress the same way or at the same levels. What is overwhelming to one pastor might be an optimal level of stress for another. The goal is not to eliminate stress. Just as people do not thrive when they are overwhelmed by stress, neither do people thrive in the absence of stress and strain. Just as in physical exercise, a healthy level of strain pushes one to the next level or goal.

Power of Letting Go: The next step in creating a healthy environment is the intentional process of letting go negative stressors and reactions. They need to identify and let go of negative scripts and systems that they have learned in life. Often people’s reactions to stress reinforce the stress rather than relieve it. This can be seen when they stop exercising, increase screen time, hide in technology, or abuse food or alcohol/ medications.

Sabbath: Finally, pastors must intentionally plan and take times of sabbath. Siebert talks of the importance of a balance of time between stress and strain, and relaxation. Pastors must model and practice the rhythms of work, rest, and play if they are to deal with the ongoing level of stress in ministry. (Jones & Armstrong, 2006, p. 59) The psalmist writes, “Be still and known that I am God.” (Ps. 46:10) Jesus would spend time alone before major decisions and challenges in his ministry.

Journaling Assignment:

Your pastor is struggling with conflict with one of their most influential members. What counsel do you have for them?