Ministering to Ministers: 10 Vital Ways You Can Help

Another pastor committed suicide over the weekend.

Thirty-year-old Andrew Stoecklein, lead pastor of Indian Hills Church in Chino, California, took his own life on Saturday after a long battle with anxiety and depression.

With the growing pressures of congregational life combined with the constant burden to grow all aspects of the church, pastors can find themselves in unhealthy situations that lead to severe anxiety, darkening depression and what they conclude are unescapable conditions.

I personally have known two colleagues who committed suicide.

They were both great men leaving their grieving families and congregations behind.

In both instances, the news of their deaths was both shocking and disheartening, as it later was revealed they both had long struggles with anxiety and depression.

After 23 years of pastoral ministry, I can testify to the reality of anxiety and depression being a norm for many pastors.

The expectations and pressures on pastors can be extreme. It does not matter the size (in many cases, smaller churches can be the most difficult because of the shortage of other staff members); all pastors feel the heavy burden of leading their flocks.

Churches are often times unaware of the pressures facing pastors, so let’s go over just a few.

Pastors are expected to prepare and deliver oratorical perfection each week, challenging, inspiring and encouraging the congregation as though “Braveheart” merged with “Mr. Rogers.” Plus, they must use the right wording so not to offend and lose a member.
The pastor feels the stress of preparing sermons that are thought-provoking, humorous, serious, entertaining and balanced with the perfect illustrations and life applications.

And yes, pastors must do this each week or face the disheartening whispers, “I wish he/she would preach on something else,” or “I can’t believe he/she said that from the pulpit,” or “I just wish the sermons had more energy.”

Other ministry responsibilities take pastors to hospitals, funeral homes, weddings, home visits, prospective-member visits, birthday parties, retirement events and other social considerations that are not directly related to their job descriptions but are told it would be wise for them to attend.

In each one of these scenarios, pastors must bear the burden of spiritual leader. In all those moments when the pastor asks parishioners, “How are you doing?” very seldom is that question returned.

Bearing this burden can be excruciating at times, for pastors are often never given permission to remove the “hat” and be human.

In addition to the above responsibilities, pastors are also asked to run church business, merging the positions of CEO, CFO, COO and skilled laborer into one.

They are expected to be entrepreneurial but not too much, so things don’t change.

They are called to reach out to new prospects – yet bring in the right prospects – for again, we don’t want them changing everything. And if things do change, it’s always the pastor’s fault.

Pastors also are saddled with worrying about the struggling budgets and disgruntled staff members.

And, it’s one of only a few professions where the pastor’s labor force is also their customers, adding the peculiar tension of challenging and pacifying members.

Needless to say, the profession of pastor is deeply complex. One must be an educator, chaplain, motivator, manager, leader, worker, accountant and janitor all in one job.
It is easy to see how pastors can face burnout, anxiety and eventually depression. In addition to the angst of the job, if mental health issues are not addressed quickly, the pressures of ministry will only escalate problems.

As an acknowledgement to the pressure pastors face, I would like to offer the following vital items that pastors need for long-lasting and healthy ministry:

1. Having a mentor saved my ministry. If I did not have men and women I could confide in from time to time, I would have left ministry a long time ago.
2. Colleague support. Having a trusted group of colleagues where sacred space can be created to learn, grieve, gripe, laugh and cry will provide much needed encouragement.
3. Professional therapy. Pastors need someone (preferably a professional therapist) to communicate with outside their congregations, colleagues and family. Pastors should not wait to see a therapist until problems arise. Routinely talking with a professional therapist can often head off emotional and cognitive problems before they escalate.
4. Routine time off. Pastors are notorious for working 50 to 60 hours per week. They need routine time off with their families and friends, plus time to be alone with their thoughts.
5. Mandatory vacation. Make certain pastors take their allotted vacation time. If they attempt to forgo it with the excuse of lack of time or resources, churches should make time and find the resources for them. Both the minister and church will benefit.
6. Permission to be human. Pastors rarely are allowed to be themselves. Even in social situations with church members, they are often confronted with a question about the church or theology. They need space and moments when being human is more important than being pastor.
7. Freedom to learn. Giving pastors the freedom to learn and expand their knowledge of God can be a life force for many. Many pastors have inquisitive minds that thrive on learning more about God and God’s ways, but often the business of the church and family responsibilities hinder academic pursuits.
8. Freedom to preach. Stop criticizing your pastor’s preaching to others. Pastors work very hard on sermons, so when members start conspiring behind the pastor’s back, it creates mistrust and an unhealthy
environment. Giving a pastor the freedom to preach often inspires ministers to be more creative and thoughtful in their preaching. Subtle and secret criticism often stifles preaching, creating suspicion and cautiousness.

9. Freedom to lead. When a congregation gives the pastor permission to lead as partners in ministry, entrepreneurism and creativity flourish. Pastors need freedom to cast vision as they work with the congregation. Gamesmanship and political maneuvering can be replaced with collegiality and collaboration when pastor and church work together instead of as competing entities.

10. Share the burden. Freedom to lead means the church must accept its responsibility not merely as an overseer of pastoral leadership, but also as a true partner in ministry. The burden of Christian minister is far too great for one individual to bear, so sharing the burden strengthens the bonds that unite pastor and church.

Far too many pastors are succumbing to the pressures of pastoral ministry. Some have taken their own lives; others engage in a variety of self-harming behaviors. The church must recognize the important role it has in ministering to the minister.

We must work hard to prevent another pastor from making such a heartbreaking decision.

As Hebrews 13:7 commands, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life.”

As the church, let’s work together and reach out to help the most generous and loving people in our lives.

Pastors, we love you!

Note: If you are a pastor and need someone to talk to right now, please email me at mitch@ethicsdaily.com so we can set up a time to visit.