

‘Don’t wait to get help’: How churches can care for their ministers’ mental health

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Preston Crowe, Counseling Pastor of Broadmoor Church, Madison, and Director of the Center for Hope and Healing, guarantees there is no “cookie-cutter” counseling; different methods work for different people. “For some,” Crowe explained, “Christian counseling looks primarily like prayer and Scripture, and certainly the counselor listening and trying to help formulate a plan to move forward. For others, Christian counseling includes components of that, but also includes what we have learned from psychology and science, how the body and brain work. You may, in a Christian counseling setting, hear Scriptural principles very overtly throughout the course of that session. You may also sit with a counselor who is a strong believer and counsels from those principles but does not weave it in quite as much on a session-by-session basis.

“Part of that is because counselors are trained to get to know their client and, in some cases, follow the lead of the client. They try to find what is going to work best with that particular client. But if someone is looking for Christian counseling, it should look different from non-Christian counseling in the sense that somewhere in the process, there should be a direct tie-in to principles that would uphold Scripture, that would move people toward the things that God wants them to be moving toward.”

In many cases, Christians unintentionally place upon themselves a personal shame when considering counseling. Crowe stated that the stigma he hears most among Christians is the

idea that, "If I'm a strong enough Christian, then I shouldn't need counseling and shouldn't struggle in these areas of my life."

In seasons of struggle, Crowe highlighted that the next step is not always professional counseling. "For some people, talking to a close friend or being a part of a small group where they can open up and be honest, can provide a lot of relief for some of these things. Certainly, pastors are comfortable talking about mental health to some extent at least, so a person should feel free to not only ask their pastor for prayer and guidance from Scripture, which is very appropriate, but also to say, 'I think I may need something more. Can you point me in the right direction?' I would encourage all pastors to have a short list of places they can refer to for those situations."

For Christians seeking counseling, Crowe advised them to research various counselors and make an informed decision based on the topics to which the counselor's background and experience pertain. Crowe also recommended believers seek out Christian counselors who hold a compatible, biblical worldview.

Mental Health of Ministers

But one question begs an answer – what does Christian counseling look like for the minister?

"Pastors," said Crowe, "and anyone in ministry, have some of the loneliest jobs, in terms of the freedom to be open or real about their struggles. It's tough when your friends are within the church; you don't want to play favorites, nor are you always comfortable sharing things with people inside of the church. Yet a minister's friends outside of his church are often fellow pastors and ministers, and even in that regard, sometimes there is a tension because they feel like they have to put on a face even around them."

Neil Marsh, Executive Pastor of Ministry at Broadmoor Church, Madison, and a licensed psychologist in the state of Mississippi, formerly worked with the VA System (the Department of Veterans Affairs) and in the MS Department of Mental Health. "My journey with mental health," shared Marsh, "has been not only professional but personal, as I've gone through different seasons where I have seen my personal counselor sometimes weekly, sometimes every month or every couple of months. It is a practice that I maintain to be as healthy as possible. I urge our staff to do the same, and we revolve our conversations around how we can not only be healthy ministers but also healthy human beings and followers of Jesus. So for me, the practice of counseling has been really, really important."

Marsh acknowledged that, depending on their life story, some ministers may feel reluctance toward personal counseling, but in many cases, pastors and ministers just do not have access to that service. "They may live in a small community where they are the counselor for others, and they may not know how to personally pursue that opportunity where they are at, and not only counseling but just good healthy friendships where biblical community can occur for a pastor. Typically, pastors and ministers provide opportunities for others to have community, but for ourselves we may not create opportunities for friendships, or seek counseling at the moment of crisis."

Signs of Burnout

Crowe encouraged congregations to be aware of the mental health of their ministers. Some signs of burnout he included are:

- Apathy: When a minister loses motivation toward topics or activities he was once passionate about. This may be a church-related topic or even an activity at home.
- Avoidance: When a minister seeks to be out of the office

as much as possible or finds ways to not attend certain meetings or fulfill tasks he normally would do.

- Unusual Anger: When a minister carries a stress which flares up through quick flashes of anger not normal to his character.
- Daydreaming Other Options: When a minister wonders, "Is there another church or another job outside of the church that I could do?" Crowe assured that the thought is common for ministers facing burnout.
- Decision Fatigue: When a minister makes decisions in isolation without running it through proper channels, growing tired of the system and acting on his own.
- Distraction: When a minister seems constantly unfocused amid the work going on around him.

"Sometimes burnout shows up more at the church," said Crowe. "Sometimes burnout shows up more in personal life, things that the family start to catch, like a distracted father or husband, a man who is normally even-keeled but all of a sudden seems like everything is setting him on edge.

"One way that we can help anybody in ministry is for churches to take this seriously and understand that pastors and ministers, at the end of the day, are human. They are going to face many of the same things that the people in the congregation face. They are going to have family struggles just like others have. They are going to potentially have bouts of depression or struggle with anxiety, and there may even be a biological or chemical side to some of these things that they have never addressed.

"So it's important for church bodies to realize, 'Yes, he is God's appointed person to shepherd this particular flock, and there are certain roles and responsibilities which go along with that, but he is also human and he is going to have human struggles just like everyone else.'"

How Congregations Can Help

- Allow ministers to have struggles. Expect struggles to come, and don't assume he can handle it on his own.
- Consider setting aside, as many churches are beginning to incorporate, some funds for counseling and/or spiritual coaching as a part of the church's care of your pastor.
- Encourage your ministers to use their ministry leave/vacation time.

"It really is a way of saying to your pastor, 'If you go through a hard time, we would rather join you and walk alongside you through offering counseling, so that you can stay as healthy as possible, than for you to battle this alone and quit,'" said Crowe.

How Church Members Can Help

Individual church members can play a deeply impactful role, as well. As a grateful minister on the receiving end, Marsh shared, "Ask questions in a non-rushed manner, not on a Sunday morning where everybody is walking by you, but actually during the week, by inviting them and becoming a safe place where you and a minister can have real conversations. There are a lot of good books about this, so I encourage church members to be curious students of what the life, the common fears, and the struggles of a minister or a pastor are like, whether you read things like Peter Scazzero's *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* or anything by Dallas Willard, so that you have a sense of what healthy questions to ask.

"Then pray for your leadership team in authentic ways, not about how that person performs, but how healthy the person is as a husband or wife, father or mother, or just as a friend. It's easy to make caricatures of people or compartmentalize them into one people rather than see them as individuals who

are whole human beings. Slow down and have real conversations with your ministers, sharing your own vulnerabilities, and understanding that ministers can lead vulnerably themselves. Good things that have been the most helpful to me are when church members have slow lingering moments to have substantive conversations about how I am or what fears I have, where the answer is not the obligatory 'Fine' or 'Busy.' Make sure that pastors and ministers know counseling is a safe option, that when they talk about it, it's a normal thing."

How Pastors Can Get Help

"To the pastors and ministers reading this," Crowe emphasized, "take your leave. Whatever your ministry leave and vacation time is, use that. Pastors are notorious for reaching the end of the year and realizing they never used their vacation time. One great practice on that, and you may have to adjust it multiple times, is to sit down early in the year and think through times when you will be away. Things come up and sometimes you have to adjust, but you are more likely to adjust it from one block of time on your calendar to another than you are to add it if it wasn't already there. So use that time.

"And pastors, consider counseling for yourselves, because you are human and you are going to need a place to work through some things from time to time in a safe environment. To the extent that you can share with your congregation, your personal counseling also lets your congregation know that it's okay to seek help. If we struggle with something physically, we go to the doctor and we wouldn't think twice about that. So if we are struggling with something mentally or emotionally, it's okay to sit down with a counselor and open up with them. I encourage you to be open-minded to it and to practice self-care, because the healthier you can stay, the healthier you are going to be for your family, and ultimately for your congregation.

“Don’t wait to get help. A lot of us think, ‘I can get through this, so I will give it some time and deal with it later’ or ‘Let me just get through this next event or this next season.’ If you’re beginning to feel it, now is the time to go on and meet with someone, talk to someone, and get some help in that regard. Don’t wait until you’re right on the edge of burnout or leaving ministry altogether to try to deal with it. Go and get help as soon as you can.”

We encourage you to share this article with your ministers and church members. Continue to pray for the Church to remember the wounds and struggles of our Savior, Jesus, who is strong through our surrendered weaknesses. To find out what the Mississippi Baptist Convention offers for the mental and spiritual health of our ministers, visit the Pastor and Leadership Development page on the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board website.

For more resources and assistance, visit the 1-844-PASTOR1 North American Mission Board site at <https://www.namb.net/resource/1-844-pastor1/>.