

THE LIFE OF A PASTOR

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The pastor of a church has a very high calling. This calling results in times of great joy, but also times of great, ongoing difficulty and the risk of burnout. Unlike most careers, 'pastor' does not have a specific job description, regular office hours or set salary. He can find himself on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and subject to unrelenting criticism and unrealistic expectations from members of his congregation, his leaders and the church council. He is often dependent on those same people's voluntary donations in order for the church to survive.

Recent surveys of churches in the US reveal that up to 50% of pastors are seriously thinking of leaving the ministry permanently at any one time. (And many pastors' children turn their backs on Christianity because they witness at first hand the difficulties their parents face.) The reasons given are many, but here are the most common:

- Stress
- Loneliness/isolation
- Criticism and division within the church
- Negative impact on family
- Lack of respect
- Declining attendance
- Financial issues

ADVICE TO PASTORS

'We need sages to advise us, leaders to direct us or hold us accountable, peers to remind us that we aren't alone, healers to dress our wounds and companions who carry us when we can't carry on.'

— Glenn Packiam, *The State of Your Church*

The big question every pastor will face is how to stay loving, patient and kind, but also become thick-skinned enough to survive the difficulties described above.

Develop healthy supportive relationships

It is simply not possible to fulfil this calling alone—Jesus had friends and companions and the Apostle Paul never travelled alone.

Work at building relationships with other like-minded pastors with the aim of walking together. Bear in mind this is different from networking, where another leader is only interested in your church in as far as it will serve their own agenda.

1. Be genuinely accountable to your own leaders. It is also very helpful, encouraging and sometimes life-saving to have your own spiritual father (for example Moses and his father-in-law Jethro; Paul and Timothy). This is not necessarily based on age, so your spiritual father could be younger than you.
2. Build your own leadership team according to biblical principles (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-16). Like you, your young leaders will not be perfect and will sometimes make mistakes, however the passages above emphasise they must not be new converts. It is also clear that a person's character is much more important than their gifting.
3. Look after your wife and children. Your ministry success will be totally dependent on the support and wellbeing of your wife. Don't take her for granted and give your family the attention and time they need.
4. Love your people. We are all called upon to love and serve each other humbly and graciously. However a pastor is not called upon to be everyone's doormat. You do not have to like everyone, be everyone's best friend or remember everyone's birthday and you are allowed to set boundaries. Being genuinely loving and kind sometimes means confronting bad behaviour and being prepared to let people go.

Don't compare yourself with other pastors or churches

While it's nice to have a large, growing church, the New Testament never even hints that numbers are important or the measure of the quality of a church. Whether you have 12 people or 12,000 people you are called to faithfully look after those God has placed in your church. After all, it is His church, not yours.

Deal with criticism

Dealing with criticism can be a big challenge as it is very hard to not take criticism personally and it can make you lose perspective very quickly. It's important to listen to criticism because there may be truth in it that requires your attention. However, it is also important to not become so sensitive to criticism that people with genuine questions or concerns no longer feel able to approach you, which can result in the church taking on an almost cultish atmosphere.

Sadly, there are people who become chronically and repeatedly hostile in a passive aggressive manner, usually over minor church culture or style preferences rather than major doctrinal truths. These are often people with underlying agendas who will never be satisfied with your explanations or apologies, but will instead come back again and again with more 'issues'. Over time this can develop into gossip, slander and divisiveness and can lead to the destruction of a church.

The Bible is very straightforward in how we should deal with such people once they have been warned. We are to let them go and have nothing further to do with them (Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:10; 1 Timothy 6:3-6).

However, do remember that most of the people in your church are not like this and will only want the best for you!

Stay focused on your calling

Prayer, preaching and teaching the Word are the main roles of a pastor, and they are needed in our churches now more than ever. It is easy to allow urgent church matters to encroach into prayer and study time and it is important to not allow this to happen. Your leaders and congregation will never progress further than you do in attitude, character and spiritual maturity.

Look after yourself

One of the pieces of safety advice given at the beginning of any flight concerns the use of oxygen masks. If the masks are needed you are instructed to make sure yours is fitted before helping anyone else. As a pastor, you will be of no use to God or your congregation if you don't look after your own health and well-being.

1. Take adequate rest. Most people need 7-9 hours of sleep each night in order to stay healthy. Make sure you take your day off and be as strict as you need to be in order to make sure it happens. Take your holiday entitlement and, if possible, go somewhere away from home for a complete change.
2. Eat healthily and don't drink too much alcohol. Do everything you can to avoid lifestyle illnesses that might shorten your useful time in ministry. As you get older,

poor nutrition—and weight gain in particular—can have a profound effect on your physical and mental health.

3. Get some regular exercise. Find an activity you enjoy and can sustain in the long-term. The recommendation is to do 3 hours of moderate exercise per week.
4. Develop a healthy, enjoyable hobby.

Don't take yourself too seriously!

You are human. The late Queen Elizabeth was rumoured to have stated the secret of her very long reign: 'I take my job very seriously but I don't take myself too seriously. After all I serve a much greater Master.'

ADVICE TO CHURCHES

'Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this with joy and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit.'
(Hebrews 13:17, NLT)

1. Your pastor (and his family) is your most valuable asset. Work hard not to take him for granted.
2. Be mindful of your pastor's calling and biblical job description (Acts 6.4). God will hold your pastor accountable for his primary function which is prayer, preaching and teaching, so prayer, studying and preparation should take up most of his time.
3. Do not be offended when you are ministered to and helped in practical ways by someone other than the pastor. Your pastor will not have the time to be everything to everybody. Paul teaches that every one of us is part of the local church body and should be playing our part in helping and supporting each other (Romans 12:1-8).
4. Do not expect your pastor to be your best friend. Although he will love all his people, he is allowed to follow the examples of Jesus and Paul and have best friends in—and outside—church.

Promote unity

1. Our words are very important. Constant criticism and negativity towards pastors is one of the main reasons given by those considering leaving ministry. Asking questions and seeking clarification should be easy to do in any church, but this is very different from criticism. The latter usually reflects a negative spirit or an underlying agenda and becomes very wearying for pastors. It also can have serious consequences for you—grumbling against a pastor is the same as grumbling against God (Numbers 16).

2. Offence is a choice. Choose not to get offended with your pastor or with each other (Matthew 18). Most offences within church stem from small issues ('the pastor didn't shake my hand today', etc.) where no malice is intended. Other issues may involve your particular church culture or customs and are not of central importance (music style, service times, teaching on alcohol abstinence or not) and the solution is to keep your personal preferences personal. Offence is the spiritual equivalent of cancer, and if not ruthlessly dealt with will lead to bitterness, increasing pride, rebellion and spiritual death. If someone—including your pastor—has offended you and you cannot let it go, it needs to be dealt with and resolved as quickly as possible.
3. Avoid gossip. This is otherwise known as 'prayerful concern' (2 Corinthians 12:20; Matthew 18). If an issue arises between two people in the church it needs to be addressed initially by the people concerned without gossiping to anyone else. If that fails it then goes to the church leadership.
4. Hold your ministries and gifts lightly and prioritise your Christian growth. This makes character development and humility much more important than gifting. The best example of this comes from John the Baptist (without the ending!). His attitude when questioned was, 'I am doing this until someone better comes along'.

Look after your pastor's family

1. A pastor's wife's well-being is essential to her husband's success in ministry. When he suffers constant criticism (and sometimes 'friendly fire'), his wife suffers even more and often in silence.
2. A pastor's children have not asked to be his children. Allow them to behave like normal kids and do not hold them up to a standard you do not expect from your own or anyone else's children.

Encourage your pastor

Have an attitude of generosity towards your pastor and his family, especially as the years go on.

1. Say thank you (preferably in writing) when his preaching/teaching has especially ministered to you. Let him know your appreciation.
2. Bless him and his family in practical ways—birthdays and Christmas are good opportunities.
3. Recognise his boundaries and respect his days off.

4. Look out for him and his family. This is not a reason to gossip or be intrusive, but if you notice he seems tired and you know a child is ill for example, there may be ways you can make his life a little easier (provide meals, do some gardening, etc.).

Pray for him and his family daily

Satan is constantly on the lookout for ways to destroy a church. He will always target the head and his family first.

If your church can afford it, pay him well

There is no Biblical mandate to keep your pastor poor. He should be able to concentrate on his ministry and not worry how he is going to pay his bills (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Cor. 9:9-11).

'Surely you know that if a man can't be cured of churchgoing, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighbourhood looking for the church that "suits" him until he becomes a taster or connoisseur of churches.'

— C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

'For the Church is not a human society of people united by their natural affinities, but the Body of Christ, in which all members, however different (and He rejoices in their differences and by no means wishes to iron them out) must share the common life, complementing and helping one another precisely by their differences.'

— C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis*