

7. Who cares about the pastor?

Who Cares About the Pastor? by Rev Declan Flanagan Chief Executive, Rural Ministries

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The best job in the world?

Being involved in Christian ministry can be a wonderfully rewarding calling. I thoroughly enjoyed twenty-four years of ministry in two churches, where people were incredibly supportive. While many faced constant pressures at home or work, I was permitted time to study the Bible, pray and have access to the lives of people, some of whom were changed beyond recognition. The challenges were many but I believe my occupation was the most privileged one in the world. There are not many jobs that have eternal consequences.

Partly because I so enjoyed pastoral ministry, I sense a deep responsibility to speak out on behalf of those who have found the opposite. Many pastors are either unwilling, or feel unable, to describe the inner tensions they experience. It is time to ask not what your pastor can do for you, but what should you be doing for your pastor.

The worst job in the world?

B.A.L.M. is one of the most tragic sites on the web. The letters stand for Bullied & Abused Lives in Ministry. The site contains accounts written by those whose experience of ministry has been anything but positive.

A recent residential retreat for church leaders in the Midlands advertised for participants by stating:

- 98% of ministers and vicars feel stressed
- 86% are depressed
- 83% are angry
- 63% feel lonely
- 33% are thinking seriously about leaving their job.

Peter Brain in "Going the Distance" (Matthias Media) reports:

- 27% of pastors suffer burn out, a break down or serious illness within ministry
- The figure rises to over 44% after 14 years.

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Any Human Resources professional would find such figures deeply disturbing. A business could not justify expenditure in training and developing their staff, only to face such high levels of discontent and loss among their employees. Many churches have given little thought to their responsibility to their pastors, and in places, reasonable employment practice is totally ignored. I consider the way many churches treat their leaders is partly responsible for the lack of good quality people prepared to consider Christian ministry. Something is seriously wrong.

Let the Bible speak

"Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work".

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

Paul is coming to the end of his first letter and deals briefly with a number of practical issues. He is aware that church leaders may abuse their positions and become overbearing. They will need patience and persevering love for their people. Paul also takes the opportunity to address those whose attitude to leaders is unhelpful.

On one occasion, as a visiting preacher, I encountered a man who told me his contribution to the church was to be sternest critic of the leaders. After describing their shortcomings, with some delight, he asked if I had any advice for him. One word: "Repent". I quickly ended the conversation.

If you are going to be a blessing to your church leaders, Paul tells us to:

Respect your leaders

He is not speaking of a single individual, or someone with a particular title in the church. Elders, pastors, overseers and bishops all receive mention in the New Testament. Team leadership is the New Testament pattern. Within any team, leadership will emerge depending on the gifting and calling by God. The Chief Shepherd is the Lord himself and he delegates to under-shepherds, the care of the church of God, described as the flock (Acts 20:28). It is God's plan that the church should enjoy pastoral oversight, whether paid or unpaid. Those who serve in this way are worthy of respect.

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Respect their hard work

Paul uses a phrase associated with manual work and the tiredness that results from sustained exertion. I would be a rich man if all those who commented I only worked one day a week as a pastor donated £1 to the pastor's benevolent fund. It's hard concentrated work preparing sermons; teaching effectively; praying regularly; visiting the sick; reaching the lost; preparing people for baptism or marriage and comforting the sad. This is particularly difficult to do just on a Sunday! In reality most effective pastoral care is largely unseen, except for the individuals involved and the Lord who sees everything. The best way to discover how a pastor uses their time is not to speculate but ask them personally.

Respect their responsibility as overseers

It is the Lord's plan that there are those who watch for your souls and who must give an account (Hebrews 13:17). Overseeing is about leaders being prepared to lead but doing so in a way that both protects and cares for others.

A pastor will constantly struggle with the complex relationship between being both leader and servant within a church. While the pastor will always be the servant of the church, the church can never be their master.

Respect their role in admonishing you

Admonishing is about warning you against bad behaviour and its consequences. This will frequently come through the regular teaching of God's word but also in personal conversation at times. I have never found admonishing others easy because of my own frailties, but this is no excuse for neglect. Urging and guiding people to live in obedience to Christ may result in hostility towards the pastor. However when the warning is heeded, gratitude and respect often follow.

How many churches would be more united if the pastors were respected for their hard work, their responsibility as overseers and as those prepared to lovingly admonish? Lack of respect often brings a lack of peace, with power struggles and pastors broken.

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Hold them in the highest regard in love

Paul combines the two life-enhancing qualities of appreciation and affection. Lack of appreciation for hard work is what often robs a pastor of their enthusiasm. Nobody likes to be constantly taken for granted. One pastor told me someone informed him that he had to do what he was told in the church because they were paying his wages. He did not stay there long.

In one of the churches where I served, two senior friends came from very different backgrounds. One, who used to belong to a strict Baptist Church, would put his arm round my shoulders and call me rather quaintly "brother beloved." He meant it. The other, an outstanding former Pentecostal pastor, some forty years my senior, always commenced a conversation by asking "And how is my pastor today?" A brief conversation with either of these men would be enough to strengthen me for conversations with those blessed with the gift of discouragement.

We hold our leaders in the highest regard when we:

Respect their humanity

Just like you, they have **physical needs**. There must be time for the renewal of physical resources, or exhaustion will gradually creep up on them. If a person is stretched too thinly, they will be ineffective. Many pastors feel guilty about taking time off. They tend to work harder than their creator who established the pattern of one day in seven for rest. In the Gospels we read of Jesus needing to leave the crowds and head for a quiet place. A church shows it cares for their pastor by ensuring they take adequate time away from their responsibilities. I am grateful for some good friends who could see the signs of fatigue and say, "It's time we played golf again." Many churches have now established a pattern of sabbatical breaks to help sustain people in ministry. Pastors also have intellectual needs. They will often be wrestling with what a particular Bible passage is saying and how it relates to the contemporary world. There are complex moral and ethical issues to struggle with. An opportunity to attend courses that stimulate fresh thinking will be appreciated.

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Responsible employers invest in staff development – churches should ensure their pastors are involved in lifelong learning.

A frequently unrecognised factor is that the pastor has **emotional needs**. Pastors tend to assist others in emotional turmoil, but ignore what is going on in themselves. The highs and lows of ministry are demanding. I recall one day one particular Christmas when I had four sermons needing attention, a funeral to take, a guest appearance as an “Ugly Sister” in the pantomime, a visit to someone considering taking her life, and a meeting in the evening. I also had a short time at home, failing to be a loving husband and father.

Pastors who don't recognise the changes in emotions throughout a week are vulnerable to depression. Feeling responsible for everything that happens in people's lives may become a crushing weight. Those who regularly require “emotional strokes” will be disappointed, or tempted to find them in inappropriate relationships.

Compassion fatigue is a condition affecting those who work in the caring professions. Someone may reach a point where they are so spiritually, emotionally and physically drained that they are unable to perform their duties. It must be more helpful to spot symptoms in advance, encourage good medical advice and avoid the damaging consequences.

The **social needs** of a pastor also need to be considered. Sometimes the pastor and their spouse are the loneliest people in the church. They face a major tension in determining the level of friendship appropriate with people in the church. Who can they really trust?

Another major tension for the pastor is that their church activities always involve a public role, with accompanying expectations. On many occasions I have asked “Who am I? Have I become the fulfilment of others' expectations and is it possible to participate in normal social interaction?”

Making time for existing friendships and developing new ones has been a vital part of enjoying life and Christian ministry. To be included in parties, a concert, sporting occasions and other social events has been life-enhancing.

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Pastors may struggle with the same things you struggle with. They have **spiritual needs**. It is vital to create time for personal prayer, meditation and spiritual exercise. In order to feed others they must feed themselves. Their particular points of temptation will be well-known to the enemy. Many will be cast down as a result of being over-sensitive, over-conscientious and over-caring for others. Paul's instruction to the Ephesian Elders on his departure is important: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock". *Acts 20:28*

As well as leaders keeping watch over themselves, they need others to deliberately consider their welfare. I thoroughly recommend a church to arrange a review with their pastor at least once a year. This should be conducted by someone with relevant experience and be designed to encourage and affirm the pastor. With God's help it is possible to identify areas that could become a problem and establish clear, realistic objectives for the coming year. Not everything that needs attention in a church may receive it within a given year, but prayerfully sifting out priorities creates focus and energy.

Respect their family

The Bible does not list the duties a pastor's spouse should perform. They have a name and it is not Mrs Polyfilla, expected to fill every crack that appears. Each one has a unique personality and contribution to make, but they may not invest all their energies in the ministry of the church. Let your pastor's spouse be themselves.

Any children of the pastor should not be treated as little saints in the making. They are capable of being just as difficult and disobedient as any other child and should not be more harshly judged. Many will find that through the constant interaction with a wide variety of people, their social skills are more advanced than their emotional development. This may produce inner conflicts and difficulties in the home. At school they may find their values are not shared by others. Friendships may be difficult, peer pressure unrelenting and bullying not unknown.

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No child can be forced into the mould of their parents or have their salvation guaranteed. Many will struggle to find a faith of their own that provides real answers in the real world. God Himself had prodigal children. Adam and Eve were prodigals. Many prodigals do return to the faith of their childhood even though the wait for their return may be long and painful. Children respect adults who speak with them, appreciate their individuality and maintain a genuine interest especially through the teenage years.

Pray, pray and keep on praying for your pastor

Each pastor and their family is like a lightning rod for spiritual attacks from the enemy. If Satan can make a pastor stumble, it will not only affect the pastor, their family and the church, but dishonour the name of the Lord in the area.

As a church prays regularly for their pastor, something happens. God will be at work. There is the real possibility of genuine respect developing and the pastor being held in the highest regard in love. Churches like these are exhibiting the fruits of the Holy Spirit and are great places for both the pastor and the people.

What could you do to ensure your pastor is truly appreciated?