Loneliness in Pastoral Ministry

by

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Pastoral ministry can be very, very lonely. That’s not a complaint. It’s a statement of reality. I think it comes with the territory.

Other professions face the same issue, but there is something about pastors that is unique. Other professionals may have to be "on guard" in their informal behavior with others because it could affect their professional standing, livelihood, reputation. Pastors are different.

Here's what's unique about pastors. A pastor's behavior in non-pastoral settings can affect not only how people perceive him as a pastor -- or the church that he serves -- or the denomination he represents. It can affect that person's RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD since the pastor is seen as God's special representative. Every pastor knows this to be true, and it is one of the reasons why he is so extremely careful in what he says and does in social and informal relationships.

You never know what someone else is thinking about what you're saying or doing, so you watch your words and actions very, very closely. A fellow pastor once told me, "When you're with the members, you're working." Any pastor who doesn't believe that's true is living in denial. That's why in my opinion it is impossible to have "normal" friendships with the members of the congregation. But it goes beyond that.

My assumption when I am "out and about" is that I am likely to encounter a member of the congregation, or someone who is related to a member, or someone who knows a member, or someone who was a member and left, or someone who simply knows I’m a pastor. Much of the time they will not reveal themselves but will simply watch and listen and report to others on the pastor's behavior on the golf course, at the store, at a party, wherever. The pastor is powerless to do anything about it, whether it's good or bad.

In a sense this is good to keep in mind because every Christian is called to live a life worthy of our calling to follow Christ. All Christians need to be on our best behavior at all times, that's true. The problem is that a pastor's personal eccentricities, habits, customs, vocabulary, etc. can become grist for the rumor mill -- and the cause of someone falling away from church or even from God -- when in normal relationships such behaviors would be chalked up to "That's just his way. Don't worry, he's OK. He's really a nice guy." Rarely does anyone cut slack like that to a pastor.

Loneliness in ministry is something that needs to be talked about in seminary, in pastoral gatherings, every place we can. It's a huge issue. If all that we do is talk about it, that's not a bad thing, because then pastors will know that even though they are lonely, they are not alone. "The same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world." That realization can take away the power of loneliness, and its sting.

I'll close with a word of advice I received many years ago from a much older pastor: "Stay close to Jesus. He's your best Friend." Amen to that.