



Humanizing Pastors: A Focus on Clergy Suicide Prevention

More than 1 in 10 pastors have contemplated suicide in the past year.¹

In quiet moments, behind the weight of our public responsibilities and caring demeanors, many pastors wrestle with dark and daunting thoughts. These thoughts can emerge from the overwhelming demands of pastoral leadership, the emotional toll and vicarious traumas of caring for others, and the unique stressors of a vocation where they're often perceived to have unending strength and faith.

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It's crucial for everyone — friends, fellow clergy, congregants — to recognize that pastors, like all of us, are intrinsically human. They, too, experience depression and despair. Suicidal ideation, although often surprising, is not uncommon among individuals navigating high-stress and emotionally demanding professions. To acknowledge these thoughts doesn't signify weakness of faith or character. Instead, acknowledgement invites us to share in the very human reality of grappling with profound challenges.

This handout aims to offer guidance to address these thoughts without judgment or fear. Through understanding, compassion, and the right resources, we hope to shine a light through the darkness, reminding every pastor that they are not alone in their struggles. Their well-being is paramount not only for their personal journey but also for the countless lives they touch every day. As we delve into this conversation, let us remember the importance of granting our spiritual leaders the permission to be authentically human, to seek help, and to participate in the healing work of Christ with us.

Pastors may struggle with suicidal thoughts.

If you are a pastor who is having suicidal thoughts, know that you are not alone. We invite you to step out of the shadow of shame and connect with others who can walk alongside you. Sharing burdens lightens the load, and creates an entry point for more resources to follow.

If you are a friend, congregant, or family of a pastor, know that it can be extra hard for pastors to reach out for help. The public position in their community can be a barrier to sharing, especially in communities that view pastors as the helpers and not the helped, or communities that have low tolerance for doubt or for conversations on mental health. We invite you to understand the unique stress and isolation that pastors experience and to be proactive in providing support.

¹<https://rushtopress.org/9111-2/#:~:text=BELLINGHAM%2C%20Wash.%2C%20July%2015,member%20community%20and%20Facebook%20group>

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Pastors are as human as anyone.

Congregants sometimes treat pastors as superhuman — always on call, infinitely able to help, and on a pedestal of morality. We don't expect them to be God, of course, but some part of us wants them to be somehow better than the rest of us, above the fray of normal life, sustained in unwavering faith. In this way, the pastor comes to sustain not only their own faith, but the faith of the entire congregation. As Peter Rollins puts it, "I don't have to believe, my pastor does that for me."

If you are a pastor, you already know that it's hard to separate the demands placed on you from your true identity as God's beloved, as one loved for who you are and not what you achieve. Perhaps even the one with the highest expectations of all is you. There is no other job that so tightly entangles personal, professional, social, and spiritual identities. That entanglement means that an issue in one area can cause self doubt about the others, and have an exponential impact on your well-being.

Relying on God in the midst of struggle is no easier for a pastor than it is for anyone else. In some ways, going "professional" as a Christian leader can make it harder to connect to God personally. Reverend Howard-John Wesley, pastor at an influential church in D.C., spoke out about the complexity of relating to God while in ministry: "I feel so distant from God," he said in a 2019 sermon announcing his sabbatical. "One of the greatest mistakes of pastoring is to think that because you work for God, you're close to God. I want to read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation without trying to write a sermon. I want to travel and go sit in the back of somebody's church and hear the word of God and not be worried about what time we got to get out for the next crowd. ...There's a weight a pastor bears in their soul and their emotions that is inescapable. There's not been a day in these past 11 years that I have not woken up and knew that there's something I had to do for the church, that I have to be available for a call, that I journey with people through the highs and the lows of life, through the great moments of celebration and in the valley of death."¹

Pastors have stressful lives.

The role of pastor can be meaningful, but it is also stressful. Schedules are often varied and unpredictable. Many people in crisis turn first to their pastor, which can create a feeling of being on call 24/7, and often increasing the likelihood of the pastor's vicarious trauma. The pastoral role demands competence in 64 different skill sets (Bloom, 2013), and when pastors don't meet expectations, the criticism often quickly turns personal. Financially, many pastors have student debt and experience ongoing stress. On top of all of this, the expectation that the pastor be superhuman is isolating, making it hard to reach out for help.

If you push someone hard enough, they will fall down. How much effort it takes, and how they fall down, varies from person to person. But under enough stress, any person will fall down.

People need permission to be honest about mental health – and especially pastors.

Suicidal thoughts are often stigmatized in the church when they are falsely perceived to indicate a lack of faith. In reality, suicidal thoughts are an expression of a feeling of unbearable pain. That can occur as the result of chronic stress, vicarious trauma, persistent pain, or mental illness. Pastors are not immune to mental illness, which mental illness is often the result of genetics, a high-stress stressful environment, trauma, or early childhood adversities. The Duke Clergy Health Institute found that clergy experience depression at a significantly higher rate than the general population (8.7% v. 5.5%) and concluded that serving in ministry could be considered a risk factor in mental health.²

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¹<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/12/11/i-feel-so-distant-god-popular-dc-area-pastor-confesses-hes-tired-announces-sabbatical>

²<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10935-013-0321-4>

³<http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Acute-Mental-Illness-and-Christian-Faith-Research-Report-1.pdf>

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In this context, pastors who talk about experiencing suicidal thoughts or mental illness may risk losing respect or even their jobs. Dr. Jared Pingleton of the American Association of Christian Counselors notes that the problem of clergy suicide is perpetuated by the “unholy trifecta” of silence, stigma, and shame.²

As friends, families, and congregants of pastors, we can't wait for pastors to come to us with their problems. We need to approach our leaders to let them know that there are safe places to express their pain and struggles without shame, places that extend to them the compassion and graciousness that they extend to so many others.

If you are a pastor...

> Having suicidal thoughts and think you might harm yourself:

- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) at **1-800-273-8255**
- Or go to the nearest emergency room
- Or use the NSPL online chat feature for people in crisis:
<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/contact-the-lifeline>
- Or text HOME to 741741, the Crisis Text Line

> Who has struggled with suicidal thoughts (or chronic stress or mental illness) but you are not actively suicidal:

- Make an appointment with a counselor, psychiatrist, or primary care physician. Keep this appointment even if you are feeling better so you can make a preventative plan.
- Reach out to a trusted friend or colleague. Be intentional about stepping out of isolation and allowing yourself to be the helped person in a relationship.
- Consider calling the Pastor Care Line, a service of Focus on the Family, at 1-844-PASTOR1. This service is available from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. EST.

What to do if you are concerned about a pastor in your life:

- > If they are actively suicidal or talking about harming themselves, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) at 1-800-273-8255 or take them to the nearest emergency room.**
- > If you need to assess if they are currently in danger of hurting themselves, be direct. Ask about suicidal thoughts or if they have a plan to take their own life.**

¹<https://lifewayresearch.com/2013/09/17/mental-health-half-of-evangelicals-believe-prayer-can-heal-mental-illness>

²https://docs.google.com/document/d/1zVnnnQCUwm_EA5Qme1uzEq6Tx8OuVVT85f6JSAJj/c/edit#

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- > If you are not with them but you are concerned for their safety, your local police department can do a welfare check. Call 911 if it is an emergency. If it's not an emergency, find the contact number of your local police department. A police officer will visit to assess what help is needed.
- > If you have concerns, don't keep silent. Safety is the priority.

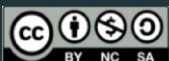
What congregations can do to prevent clergy suicide:

- > Provide adequate salary and health care benefits, including for mental wellness.
- > Encourage clergy to participate in a peer group outside the denomination.
- > Help your pastor define success in ways that go beyond numerical growth and donations.
- > Share counseling resources from the denomination and local health professionals.
- > Advocate for your pastor's boundaries, Sabbath, and time off. Ensure they take time off after especially stressful events. Check that they're using their vacation time. Initiate a volunteer on-call schedule for out of office time the pastor can actually relax in. Ask your pastor what would have the biggest impact on their wellbeing.
- > Ask your pastor questions that show that you care about them as a person. Let them know that you only expect them to be human. Be gracious when you think they have made a mistake, didn't meet your expectations, or when you disagree.

Warning Signs [From National Suicide Prevention Lifeline site: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-someone-else/>]:

- > Talking about wanting to die or to kill themselves.
- > Looking for a way to kill themselves, like searching online or buying a gun.
- > Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.
- > Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain.
- > Talking about being a burden to others.
- > Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs.
- > Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly.
- > Sleeping too little or too much.
- > Withdrawing or isolating themselves.
- > Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge.
- > Extreme mood swings.

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