

The Coming Pastoral Crash

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I don't want to be a prophet of doom, but as a minister in touch with many ministers, I see a coming pastoral crash. And I'm not sure we can stop it. The impact of the world response to COVID-19 will be felt for many years to come. It will be felt in every career field and in every home. This post does not diminish the hard work and adjustments being done by first responders, law enforcement, health care workers, and the educational structures. But from my perspective, those who serve in ministry are, in my thinking, in particular danger for several reasons.

They are serving in ways for which they have no training or experience. At first, this is energizing and sparks our creative thoughts. This energized feeling does not last, however. It is neither exciting for the minister nor the congregants after a month or so.

They are doing their best, but unable to keep it up. Frankly, it is draining. Ministers fall into the comparison trap. Some ministries were already online and have everything they need in place. Many of us, however, did not. We look at what other churches are producing and that makes our efforts feel not worth it.

They are worried about ministries that are unable to operate, and if they will be able to operate later. Some of the ministries that are very important such as support groups, specialized Bible classes (ladies, mens, teens), and Bible camps and retreats are unable to meet. The people who utilize those kinds of ministry need the support still, they are just unable to be in the same room together. Young people are missing out on the fellowship that

can strengthen their young spiritual walk. The mental and physical health of our congregations is a huge concern.

They are exhausted. Less gathering does not equal less work. If a minister is worthy of his or her calling, they are not afraid of hard work. Some members might assume that since there are no current meetings at the church building the ministers have a lot of free time. When I talk to ministers, I get the opposite impression. They are doing things they are not accustomed to doing. There is an endless array of glitches when it comes to online ministry. More, the mind of a minister is constantly thinking about how to bless his people and community – and the response to COVID-19 makes this more difficult to navigate.

They are not feeding their souls. Perhaps some ultra self-disciplined ministers are growing during this season, but what I observe is that they are so involved in this new ministry model that they have no down time. One friend said that he thought during the ‘stay at home’ time he would read many books that he had on his ‘to read’ list. Not so.

The future is cloudy. Ministers would like to plan ahead, forecast a visionary approach to the work, and proceed with energized hopes. However, like everyone else, ministers do not know what happens the next day, much less the next five Sundays. Contingency plans can be made, but one never knows what the next steps ought to be. From everything I read, we are looking at resurgence of the virus in the Fall, and what one government official called a ‘long dark winter’.

The collapse of the job and financial markets impacts churches. No doubt churches will close, having reached the end of savings and not receiving enough income to go on. Most churches in America are less than 100 members, leaving them vulnerable to shutdowns, loss of jobs for ministers, and significant issues with debt. This weighs on ministry staff and can cause a great deal of stress.

They are physically not healthy. I don’t want to mention this, but it has been pointed out many times that many in ministry are overweight, stressed, do not exercise or observe a healthy diet. Additional stress in all the areas mentioned above will have a negative result on the minister’s health. Although there is a lot of humor being expressed about eating our way through the pandemic, that probably won’t feel funny in the ER.

They have conformed to a 7 day schedule. Ministers usually have one or two days “off” per week like most people. Also most ministers are self-reporting. There’s no one making sure they work as they are asked, nor demanding that they take their time off. Church leaders should urge their ministers to take their time off seriously. Now that the awareness of what day it is has been jumbled, many are working seven days a week and not taking any sabbath rest. This is leading to depression, exhaustion, and loss of heart for the work.

They are unwilling to take time off. How can a minister consider taking a week off during a pandemic? The idea of travel is just now becoming more of a possibility – but it still carries its risks. In addition, who is going to see that all the online stuff happens if the minister is out of pocket? I know ministers who were set to take sabbaticals, but instead are running on fumes, unable to get away. Congregational leadership is not doing itself any favors by expecting the ministry staff to run full steam ahead when they do not have any steam left.

They do not seek out mental health. Some years ago a well known pastor suggested that all ministers should see a therapist once a month. We spend significant time helping other people with their problems. Although the wisest of us refer those with mental health issues to a certified counselor, we still worry about others. And we do not take care of our own mental health. Since ministers are in a helping profession, they often do not see the need to receive help themselves. There is an attempt to minister out of the emptiness of the soul which I think will result in dangerous decisions and perspectives. The recent [suicide of minister Darren Patrick](#) may have been a result of pressures pre-COVID-19, but certainly the pandemic did not help matters.

They are in dangerous spiritual territory. Weakened and exhausted, temptations that once were not so strong have now grown irresistible. Coping with the stress of this situation by numbing the pain with drugs, alcohol, pornography, gluttony, excessive television ... or anything to excess. Resistance is low to temptations that invade the minister's private space.

I believe we are going to see the affects of this pandemic on the ministers in all denominations.

All of this leads me to conclude that there is a coming pastoral crash. And I don't think we can stop it. Our pastoral care providers are maxed out. While some church members might think their preacher's duties are relaxed, but it is actually the opposite. As we head into the coming months I believe we are going to see the affects of this pandemic on the ministers in all denominations.

I'm tempted to write out a list of things we need to do now to avoid the crash. There are many articles already available (*see links below*) offering strategies for good mental and physical health. But it's hard to get preachers and ministry staff to slow down long enough to look in the mirror. It is equally hard to find church leaders who demand that their ministers slow down and get help. The impact of ministry job losses, minister burn outs, and ministry suicide is going to be a major event for the church to deal with in the coming year.

The best strategy I know

***Ministers must commit to ministering to their own hearts first.** Engage in the spiritual disciplines, re-engage frayed family relationships, restart physical exercise and rest, or take

time to rest and read non-work-related relaxing books. Whatever feeds your heart, you should do it. Now. If you are waiting for the pandemic to be over, you might not survive.

***Ministers must commit to look out for one another.** To speak into the lives of those we perceive are growing weaker will be a means of rescue for them (and perhaps yourself). We know that congregational leaders simply do not know the ministerial life. They love their preachers, but they don't live in the same world. Just as we do not live in the world of other occupations (which are facing their own crises). So, wherever you can be with other ministers and look out for one another, do so. Facebook groups, calls, emails, and now I think you can start to meet together observing social distancing... reach out to your fellow ministers. Pray for and with one another.

I hope I've overstated the case, been a worry wart, and this post won't age well. I hope in a year you'll call me 'chicken little' worried about the sky falling. But I doubt it.

Links

[When A Pastor Commits Suicide by Kevin Carson](#)

[4 Ways to Refresh When Your Soul is Weary by Dan Reiland](#)

[The Pressure on Pastors During Covid-19 by Trevin Wax](#)

[How Do I Avoid Pastoral Burnout During Covid-19 by Garrett Kell](#)

[Positive Emotional Health in the Midst of Covid-19 by Tanaya Meaders](#)

[Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation Audio Helps](#)

[4 Steps to Cultivating Pastor Resilience](#) by Jamie Aten & Kent Annan (*Note list of links in this article*)

[On the Rise and Fall of Pastors by Scott Sauls](#)

[CDC Case Study on Church Outbreak](#)

[Reopening Resources accumulated by Dr. Carlus Gupton](#)