

“Pastors Caring for Pastors”

I was recently part of a conversation revolving around the skyrocketing costs for health insurance for pastors in the West Ohio Conference. Knowing that my church is on schedule to pay \$17,600 in premiums this year, and knowing that I pay another \$1,600 in premiums and that I have paid out an additional \$7,400 in deductibles year to date, I wondered aloud how much our health insurance provider was pocketing from the pastoral families in the West Ohio Conference across the board. Imagine my surprise when I learned that our provider actually paid out a million dollars more in claims than what they took in by way of premiums! Certainly the exorbitant costs for medical care contribute to this, but the conversation quickly turned to how we can reduce the number of claims as a whole for clergy in the West Ohio conference through wellness plans. Are clergy really that unhealthy as a group?

My guess is that in some ways clergy mirror the health standards in our culture as a whole, meaning that many of us eat too much of the wrong sorts of food, exercise too little, and don't go to the doctor for regular check-ups or preventative care. I would also wager that there are certain professional hazards associated with being a pastor that have a more than normal wear-and-tear effect compared to the population in general. No, I'm not talking about too much cherry pie at the church potluck (one of my favorite sins by the way), or being attacked by overzealous kids during the children's sermon. There is a psychological strain that comes with being a pastor that may contribute to a less than ideal standard of physical health. According to Dr. Anthony Headley, an author and seasoned professor at Asbury Theological Seminary, pastors across the board report that the following is true:

- 90% -- work more than 46 hours/week
- 80% -- feel that ministry has negatively impacted their families
- 33% -- feel that ministry is hazardous to their families
- 50% -- feel unable to meet the demands of the job
- 90% -- believe they are inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands
- 40% -- report having a serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month
- 70% -- experience lower self-esteem now than when they entered ministry
- 70% -- say that they have no close friends
- 37% -- have engaged in inappropriate sexual conduct in some manner during their career

If you are a lay person, have you ever considered the constant demands that are placed on your pastor? Have you thought about the welfare of your pastor, recognizing that while he or she takes care of others, there are times when someone needs to step up and take care of them? Pastors are human, after all. They need encouragement, support, and friendship just like everybody else.

Yet sometimes it is hard for pastors to seek out help on a regular basis, let alone when things are going slightly off-kilter. Pastors are notorious for putting on a good face and acting as if everything is okay on the outside when everything feels like it is crumbling on the inside. Pastors can have problems in any area that laity have problems: marital discord, issues with children (or aging parents), addictive tendencies or behaviors, workaholicism, feelings of insecurity or purposelessness, financial problems, and on and on it goes. What might be a little different for pastors is that it is often unsafe to express these things, because to admit specific problems means that the veil is pulled back. Everyone will be able to see that the pastor doesn't have it all together. “Alert the Pastor Parish Committee! Call the DS for a pastoral change! Our pastor isn't acceptable!” So many pastors that I have known try to sort things out for themselves, hold on for dear life, and hope that things get better in time. Pastors can find themselves in a lonely and frightening place, and they may not be able to confide certain things to the members in their congregation, however close they might feel to them.

Enter the clergy clusters stage right. In the Shawnee Valley, we aspire to have no clergy person that feels alone in ministry. We want to provide safe, encouraging, and accountable environments with other pastors where someone can share confidentially what is going on in their lives and ministry. It can be a freeing thing for a pastor to have a group of people who listen to them in a grace-filled way. As I have shared parts of my life with a small group of trusted pastors, what I have found is that areas I struggle in overlap with other pastors' struggles and concerns. To know that you do not have to go it alone in ministry allows pastors to find the listening ear, the encouragement to continue on, and sometimes that corrective course change that can save a lot of grief and pain. Clergy clusters are a vital part of the Shawnee Valley's attempt to have healthy pastors serving healthy churches.

We have a number of clusters around our district where pastors are regularly meeting together. Clusters are listed on our district website with information about when and where they meet, who is involved in the cluster, and what the cluster's area of emphasis is. We currently have just over half of our clergy meeting with a cluster group. My goal as the Cluster Coordinator is to have a greater percentage of pastors meeting with one another each year. In order to realize this trend, it is important that the cluster not be seen as a coercive or threatening structure for the Denomination to keep tabs on each clergy. Rather, we want to foster a hunger for clusters in our district. We want the clustering experience to be worth the drive – the time invested in order for a pastor to attend. We want groups of pastors who care for one another through thick and thin, who hold one another accountable in love, and who sharpen one another for greater effectiveness in ministry.

To that end, I wonder if you would consider accepting an invitation? If you are a pastor but not plugged into a group, I would love to hear from you. I would ask the question, "What would it take to have you connect with a cluster?" I recognize that we have some pastors who are going to school, or who are dual career, or who have other pressing demands that militate against involvement in a cluster. My question would then shift along the line to, "How do you keep yourself healthy in ministry? What can we do as a district to come alongside you to help you thrive as a person and a pastor?"

If you are a lay person, I wonder if you would take the initiative and ask your pastor if they are meeting with a clergy cluster? Would you take some time and encourage your pastor in a thoughtful way to show your appreciation and thanks for the job they are doing? A simple card or a 2 minute phone call might do the trick. What would happen if people in each of our churches made it a habit of expressing appreciation for their pastor? Who knows, maybe a little encouragement would make the number of our health insurance claims go down! More importantly, maybe a little encouragement would help a pastor reconnect the tasks of ministry with the feeling of joy in serving the Lord and His Church.

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