

The Pressures of Ministry Life

By Bill Scheidler

The key to the success of the local church as it is in every other area of society is leadership. If the leadership of the local church is strong the local church itself will be strong and able to endure. Satan knows this as well and that is why he levels more intense, spiritual attacks against the leadership of the church. He is fully aware of the principle that if you smite the shepherd, the sheep will be scattered (Zech. 13:7).

What are the major challenges facing pastoral ministry today?

The pastor faces many unique challenges in nearly every area of life. There are challenges in his personal life, family life, social life, financial life and ministry life.

Personal Life

In the pastor's personal life he faces many challenges. He faces the challenge of maintaining his personal devotional life (feeding himself) even though he is praying for and ministering to others. He faces the challenge of being in a "fishbowl" and living with the constant expectation of perfection. He faces the challenge of being scrutinized by church members, neighbors, businesspersons and society in general because he is "a pastor." A pastor can soon feel that he has no personal life at all; he can never truly relax, attend a movie, go on vacation, golf or drive any car that he wants to drive and that his life is lived solely to please the expectation of others.

Family Life

The same pressures can easily transfer to his family. The pastor is expected to be the perfect spouse and parent who has a perfect marriage and who raises perfect children. He never speaks a cross word, he never forgets an anniversary and he never has a wrinkle in his suit.

This pressure can transfer to every other member of the family. The pastor's wife is also scrutinized by every member of the church—her hairstyle, her dress, her personality and her involvement or lack of it in the church. The pastor's children can never be normal kids. They are expected to act like adults with mature behavior at all times. His children never argue, they never talk back to a teacher and they never color outside of the lines.

In addition people have little or no regard for the pastor's schedule in relation to his family. Many people will call at all hours of the day including mealtimes, days off, evenings or even in the middle of the night. When they do call they expect the pastor to leave whatever he is doing and jump to their immediate rescue regardless of what is happening in his own family life at the moment.

Because they pay the pastor's salary, people seem to have the notion that the pastor's schedule is to be at the disposal of all of the members of the church. There are meetings many evenings. There are people who want to meet with the pastor on Saturdays, after service, for breakfast or any other time that suits them effectively destroying any

potential family life that the pastor may want to cultivate. Unfortunately many pastors are willing victims believing that faithfulness to God in ministry means putting their families “on the altar.”

As this kind of lifestyle continues over years, it is easy for the spouse and the children of the pastor to resent the congregation and resent the life of the ministry. Many preachers’ kids grow up and leave the church because they have had enough of it. They can even resent their parents feeling like they have been robbed of their childhood and their parents when they needed them the most.

Social Life

While the pastor has many appointments and many dinners out, these functions are not the same as they are with other, “non-ministry” people. When one is a pastor it is often times difficult to separate one’s social life from one’s ministry function. People relate to the pastor socially for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they want attention, they want to have an “in” with the pastor, they have a problem that they want him to solve, they want a favor or, in the odd case, they just like him and want to be his friend. Rarely is the pastor able to separate social life from business life.

Then there is the challenge of true friendships. It is difficult for a minister to develop intimacy with a parishioner who is, in a sense, under his charge. How can the pastor open up his life and share his deepest concerns with one of his members? Often times the pastor’s deepest problems are too closely associated with his life in the church and the expectations associated with his ministry. How do you share that with congregational members?

It almost takes another pastor to help another pastor. But all too often the other pastors in the city are not interested in that kind of relationship. Too many pastors in the same city see themselves as being in competition rather than on the same team. They are too involved in their own work to really give any serious time to building relationships with a fellow pastor.

And as a result, the pastoral life often becomes a very lonely life. It is not difficult to see why so many pastors face the challenge of depression, discouragement and despair. But to whom does the pastor go at these times? The average member of the congregation would be shocked if they knew their pastor was seeking “professional help.”

Financial Life

Another pressure that is on many pastors is financial pressure. Most of the churches in the world are under 200 in membership. While we hear about the large churches with plush buildings and nice benefit packages, the reality is that most pastors struggle financially and rarely have enough to free them from major concern in these areas. Many pastors are not able to live easily on the wages given by the church and so they either need to have another form of employment or other family members need to work to help support the family.

So the pastor faces a “catch 22.” On the one hand he needs to work at another job to provide for the family until the church grows, on the other hand the church will not grow if he does not give it his full attention. For these pastors it is like having two full time jobs or serving two masters. It is at best difficult and at worst impossible.

In addition, the minister has to face many expectations that put a strain on the finances in the home. The pastor is expected to dress appropriately to the call—that equals money. The pastor is expected to be hospitable and entertain people for dinner in his home—that equals money. The pastor is expected to drive a car that does not embarrass the church—that equals money. The pastor’s lifestyle and ministry almost surely demands being a two-car family—that equals money. And the list goes on.

Ministry Life

The pastor also faces challenges in his ministry life. Pastoral ministry is so complex and the issues that the pastor must face or for which he must provide an answer are ever expanding. To stay fresh and current the pastor must be continually taught himself. Many pastors (especially those not associated with a specific denomination) have had very little training in the first place. Add to that the fact that in our changing world the minister’s target is constantly changing.

In the world of business it is common for personnel to go to seminars, refresher courses and new product shows to keep themselves current in their trade. Even auto mechanics must go to school every year to be sure that their skills are in line with current technologies.

The pastor has the same needs. The pastor is not dealing with the tuning of an automobile. The pastor is dealing with issues that affect eternal lives. They are dealing with life and death. They are dealing with the most important things of life. How much more don’t they need to stay sharp and current in the answers that they give for the issues of life?

Pastors at Risk

Is it any wonder that pastors are in the high-risk category for depression, burnout, dysfunctional families, addictions, health problems and even suicide? Healthy pastors are vital to the fulfillment of God’s commission for the church. Pastors must be strengthened to meet the spiritual needs of an ever-changing world.

What encourages or inhibits the practice of good ministry?

There are many things that encourage or inhibit the practice of good ministry. The existence of the following things will encourage the practice of good ministry, while the absence of them will inhibit the practice of good ministry. Most of these areas were covered in another article on Good and Faithful Pastors. They include Pacing, Balance, Delegation, Rest, Peer-Level Relationships, Prayer Support, Accountability, Growth Opportunities, Cross-Pollination and Maintenance of Personal Disciplines.

In addition to these areas, the pastor must have a certain amount of structure to ensure that these things actually become a reality. We are not talking about a structure that in

any way dictates to the pastor or the church, but a structure that facilitates the realization of these ideals. Without such a structure, it is too easy for good intentions to give way to the natural tendency that we all have to just let life come to us.

Within such a structure the pastor can find support for a philosophy of ministry that does not put one's personal life, family, health and social life on the altar of ministry. He can find others who face the same challenges that he faces and see what they are doing to counter the negative effects of such pressure. Pastor's need such a support group that is not totally dependent upon their own ability to make it happen in their own city or town.

What types of activities that support pastoral ministry need to be expanded?

Pastors need more opportunities to interact with other pastors in a non-threatening environment. Pastors need more opportunities to build friendship relationships with other pastors and leaders who face the same things that they face. Pastors need more up-to-date resources that will help them to face the challenges of this decade. Pastors need someone to call if and when they find themselves over their heads with the responsibilities they face. Pastors need someone to be their pastor who will not wait for a crisis to "be in touch"— someone who will ask the hard questions and bring a sense of accountability to the life of the pastor.

There are organizations that exist solely for the purpose of accomplishing these tasks. However, there is no question that many of these existing programs could be enhanced and more systems within these organizations could be developed if money were not a consideration.

If some is good, more is better. There is a need for more continuing educational opportunities that a pastor who does not have vast financial resources can take advantage of. There is a need for more places that are set up for the specific purpose of refreshing the lives of pastors and their families. There is a need for more church consultants to be released who can actually come on site and assist pastors with practical suggestions for advancement and growth. There is a need to reach into the ever-expanding group of ethnic pastors right here in the USA with materials, resources and ministry assistance (Note: It is computed that in 30 years if trends continue at the present levels that there will be no racial majority in the US. The church needs to get ahead of this trend in preparation for harvest).

If you are not personally part of a network of pastors locally, make it a priority to do so. If you do not belong to a ministry network that is established for the purpose of strengthening pastors search one out and become a part of it. I recommend the organization to which I belong—Ministers Fellowship International. You can contact them at mfi-online.org.