

Why Don't They Ask for Help?

Why don't pastors and other church workers ask for help when their lives are starting to get seriously out of balance? I'll focus on pastors because that's the group that I know best. The answers may well apply to other ministries and ministers.

Why don't pastors ask for help? Why don't they take action to address the threats of spiritual attack, burnout, stress-out, secondary traumatic stress, or the spiritual pressure of caring for souls? Here are some possible answers.

- *They take seriously the idea of offering themselves as a living sacrifice, but sometimes they carry it too far.* I remember a time early in my ministry when a fellow pastor asked me, “What time do you quit work?” I had no idea what he was talking about. I said, “I work until I get too tired to work any more, then I fall into bed at night, and in the morning I get up and start working again.” I love pastoral ministry, but sometimes you can be having “more fun than you can stand,” as the saying goes.
- *They are given positive reinforcement for their hard work and want to continue receiving those “strokes” – a normal human response.* This is when the pastor is thinking, “I like to work and the people like it when I work, so that's what I'll keep on doing.” Who rewards a pastor or pays him a compliment for taking care of himself and staying strong for ministry? To borrow from Stephen Covey, “production” has a good chance of being rewarded. Taking care of your “production capability” (e.g., self-care, continuing education, etc.) is not so likely to be rewarded. As much psychological research has demonstrated, positive reinforcement produces more of the behavior that is reinforced.
- *They don't want to appear weak or needy.* Here's what this response sounds like: “I'm the helper, not the one who is helped. I'm the caregiver, not the one who receives care. If I start asking for help, people will start to think I'm in trouble, and I don't want them to think that, even if I am. I'd better keep my problems to myself.” Very few problems get solved by keeping quiet about them.
- *They don't want to lose their effectiveness in ministry or maybe even lose their ministry.* “Would people still want me to be their pastor if they knew the problems that I have? Maybe they wouldn't come to me anymore. Maybe they might decide I shouldn't be in this congregation any longer. I'm just going to tough it out and hope for the best – or at least hope that the worst doesn't happen.” That's a terribly lonely way to feel. It doesn't help the situation.
- *They may think of themselves as invulnerable.* They're thinking, “That would never happen to me. I would never do that. I'm way too strong. I have my act together.” Do you notice anything about those four sentences? They're all about “me” and “I”. As the

proverb says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” Need I say more?

- *They may be in outright denial.* “What problem? Nothing is wrong. Everything is fine.” In this context, words like “nothing” and “everything” indicate a loss of contact with reality. Sadly, it sometimes takes a major explosion to shatter the facade of denial and expose the truth of the situation. That's called exposure by explosion, and it's not pretty. It's not happy either. But sometimes that's what it takes. If the exposure to reality can be done by intervention rather than explosion, it's much easier on everybody in the long run – but it takes real courage and competence to do a constructive intervention.
- *They may be reluctant to trust another person to deal with them competently and confidentially.* This attitude says, “How do I know I can trust you? How do I know who's competent? I trusted somebody once, and it really burned me. Besides, I'm always telling people to take their problems to the Lord in prayer, so that's what I'll do – when I think about it -- and that's all I'll do.” This is, of course, a perversion of the purpose of prayer, but it seems to make sense, especially when there is no one around who seems trustworthy or competent.

I'm sure you can come up with other possible scenarios. All of this points out the need for strategic, proactive, personal, practical ways of connecting with our pastors and other church workers to ask them questions like these:

“How are you?”

“What's bringing you joy these days?”

“What's not going so well?”

“What is helping your wellbeing?”

“What is threatening your wellbeing?”

“How is your family?”

Lay leaders who ask these questions are to be commended and encouraged. Here's what I would say to them: “Good for you! You're doing something important and helpful. The answers may not come right away – maybe not ever – but the simple act of asking the questions will bring hope for new possibilities.”