

Coronavirus Survival Guide for Pastors

Recently, I have heard—and sensed—concerns that pastors may be suffering undue stress as the Coronavirus pandemic continues its twists and turns. The current moment of utter confusion regarding taking worship back into church buildings just adds to the stress. Though President Trump’s comments add to the urgency to focus on what constitutes health-conscious worship, I would still like to share a couple of articles that might help pastors and congregations understand the risk pastors are going through—and how we can all address it.

- [“The Coming Pastoral Crash”](#) by John Dobbs speaks to the concern that pastors are overly stressed, and at some point their resources will run out, leading to burnout or serious lapses in health and/or judgment. As I read the article, I recognized concerns for some of our own pastors, including:
 - **They are serving in ways for which they have no training or experience.** Recently, someone praised my Zoom-based worship leadership. Someone else said “well, she did go to seminary to be trained on this,” to which I replied, “but I was NEVER trained to do it on Zoom!” There’s no reason to think that pastors have some kind of divine knowledge of technology that has enabled them to make the transitions that COVID-19 has required, yet many have jumped into the deep end of the pool with everything they have, whether or not they know how to swim.
 - **They are doing their best, but unable to keep it up.** Doing this work in new, unproven ways pokes at their anxieties about performance, productivity, and frankly, congregational understanding of their best efforts. Answering the worries of congregants, and finding ways to be pastoral in totally unprecedented situations (for instance, helping families to grieve remotely, or finding food and rent for families who lost their livelihood overnight), is exhausting. The fact that church finances have been suddenly and radically reduced—which may mean job insecurity for their staff or themselves—doesn’t help.
 - **The future is cloudy.** Like everyone else, pastors are swimming in uncertainty, yet they are attempting to support their church’s ministry, even when circumstances reverse themselves from one day to the next—and we have no way to know when and how things will “get back to normal.” It is not comforting to realize that things will not go back to what we were used to and what we had prepared for.
 - **They are unwilling to take time off, and they are not feeding their souls.** As they keep running as fast as they can, they depend on adrenaline to keep themselves going—and that can’t last forever. It is sad that some pastors expressed concerns that their church members think they are not “earning their keep”—I challenged them on that, and then I heard from a church session that they in fact *did* think pastors aren’t working as hard during this crisis! And unfortunately, when we let this kind of stress overtake us, pastors are just like other anxious mortals in failing to tend to our souls. What’s worse, many are not good at asking for help, so unhelpful or unhealthy things can happen before they realize they’re in trouble.
- I was encouraged by this other short article, [4 Ways to Refresh When Your Soul is Weary](#) by Dan Reiland, which gave a few sound suggestions on how to tend to one’s soul during this time—not just pastors, but all of us who need to tend the gardens in our souls.

I wanted to share this, partly so that church leaders and members might understand some of the stress your pastors are feeling, even if they are not showing it (partly to be comforting to the church, partly out of their own hope to avoid facing the stress). I would ask that you all practice sharing grace with each other and yourselves, starting with prayer. And remember that we have counselors who are open to calls from our pastors—as well as resources from Board of Pensions and Cigna.