

Prominent Pastor's Recent Suicide Proves the Church Doesn't Quite Get It

To say I was heartbroken to hear about Inland Hills Church pastor Andrew Stoecklein taking his own life last weekend would be an understatement. Heartbroken, but not surprised. Not because I knew Andrew. As his story hit the media Friday, it was the first time I'd even heard of Inland Hills Church or of Andrew's painful journey. And yet the conversations in our home and with friends kept finding their way back to this subject. Pastors. Suicide. Pressure. Expectations. All of it. My daughter jumped in on one discussion with, "Gosh, how could someone in that kind of leadership position do that? Why would they do it?" Thankfully, that led to a deeper dialogue about personal frailty and mental health, even church culture. Honestly, any conjecture about why someone takes his own life is like looking through a keyhole—we just can't see everything. But as I've tried to think deeply about my own personal fractures and what drives a pastor to do the unthinkable, a few incomplete, unfiltered thoughts come to mind about how the church ethos has shifted.

The New Normal

Pastors and Personas: With the advent of social media, pastors are feeling the pressure of creating a pastoral persona like never before. No longer are we simply men and women with a calling to shepherd and preach and comfort in the confines of our little communities. Pastors are now required to build a brand and put on a smile. Often what is posted on social media is the furthest thing from personal reality. This pressure often drives pastors over the edge into addiction, unhealthy behavior and in rare moments, suicide.

Personal and Corporate Expectations: A friend of mine was relating his experience at the zoo. He watched as a man and his son were shouting at one of the animals taking shade under a tree. They banged on the enclosure and yelled, “Do Something!” I cringed a bit when he told me the story. Most pastors, if they’re honest, will tell you they feel like that poor warthog seeking sanctuary under the tree. Pastors feel inadequate, undereducated, unprepared for the weight of people’s broken lives and then their crazy expectations of how pastors should perform. Unseen hours are spent in hospitals and funerals and in the middle of family drama. Yet pastors are judged primarily on a 30-minute sermon, once a week. The “Do Something!” of pastoral work is driving pastors to dark places.

Mental Health: Churches have to do better in the arena of mental health. I don’t have much commentary on this simply because I feel like the church, at least our church, doesn’t have context for this. When someone in our community is at the end of his or her rope, something that is beyond our pastoral care, we refer them to a professional. Of course, we aren’t able to prescribe appropriate medications or counsel through PTSD. Like it or not, we are vastly unequipped for many of the new mental health challenges facing us. Yet at the same time, the church should be—must be—the place of greatest healing and radical grace to those who feel hopeless.

I have yet to find real clarity on this subject. Should pastors be healthier than those they lead? Probably. I mean, yes. We should be leading others into places of purpose and identity found in Jesus. But what happens when that expectation builds a wall of isolation and pressure to live a life disconnected from help?

Just this minute, I don’t have good answers.

Ironically, we filmed this short video about suicide recently. Perhaps it will educate and encourage you. {eo}

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