

Why Churches Must Get Serious About This Scary Issue Pastors Face

In his book *Courage to Be Healed*, Mark Rutland describes the time a pastor from a nearby Presbyterian church visited to welcome him to the neighborhood. Rutland was a year into pastoring a church, so the welcome was a bit late. Nevertheless, he offered him a coffee and a Lorna Doone cookie, and they settled down to chat.

But after his opening welcome, the pastor was at a loss for words. Rutland assumed it was his Presbyterian reserve. Their conversation was brief. After the pastor left, Rutland's secretary asked, "What do you think that was about?"

Two hours after he left, the Presbyterian pastor went into his study, put a gun to his mouth, and killed himself.

The death shocked everyone—his wife, his congregation and Rutland. Naturally, Rutland grappled with guilt.

"Had I missed something? Was his visit a last-minute cry for help? It seems likely, but for the life of me I couldn't remember anything he said that gave me the slightest reason to think he was at such a low point," Rutland says.

Pastors are supposed to be spiritually strong. And yet, according to a LifeWay Research survey, nearly one in four pastors have struggled with mental illness. Last year, megachurch pastor Andrew Stoecklein took his own life. This past year, after a long battle with mental illness, megachurch pastor Jim Howard also committed suicide.

Despite how commonplace these stories have become, and despite increased mental health awareness, the church demonstrates a

major need to grow in how it approaches mental health issues.

According to LifeWay Research, 60 percent of pastors do not agree that “medications should be used any time they can ease symptoms of acute mental illness.” Also, 48 percent of Christians believe prayer and Bible study alone can overcome mental illness.

The inference here is that turning to counseling, medication and other extra-church resources is seen as denying God’s ability to heal.

But the truth is, in the same way that God uses medical professionals to treat physical ailments, He uses practices outside the church to treat mental illness.

Rutland insists that churches get more serious about inner healing: “Denominations must get serious about providing counseling for pastors, not just after a breakdown or a scandal but before.”

Rutland believes this not just because of others’ experiences but also his own. In a Q-and-A session he attended, a layman responded to news of a suicidal pastor with, “I don’t see how a Christian minister could ever get to the point of doing that.”

“I do,” Rutland responded. “I’ve been right there with my toes over the edge of the abyss. And if ever once, even for a moment, you experience true depression and all that causes it and all the poison that oozes out of it, you will understand exactly how he got there.”

The reality of mental illness in the church points to a hard truth: Becoming a Christian does not guarantee inner healing.

“Salvation does what it does,” Rutland says. “It forgives us our sins and puts us in right relationship with an eternal God. It does not make us perfect. It does not heal all our

hurts or all the unexplainable behaviors that are so contrary to what we believe.”

His book draws attention to how God can work through counseling to bring about healing from past pain and trauma. Rutland emphasizes how the altered life begins at the altar, but it may need to continue in the counseling office. The first step is to remove the shame around struggle, both personally and within the larger church culture.

After 50 years of ministry and a lifetime of wrestling with himself, Rutland came to realize that the No. 1 variable in the process of healing is not the skill of the counselor—although that is still important. It’s the patient’s willingness to seek healing for his or her wounds. It’s the courage to rise above stigma.

In compiling counseling stories for *Courage to Be Healed*, Rutland said, “There was one factor that determined success or failure, one trait that lifted a troubled soul into the presence of a healing Savior and kept it there despite all pain and humiliation, despite all weariness and fear. That factor, that ingredient in the recipe of success, was the courage to be healed.” {eoa}

Mark Rutland, PhD, is a New York Times best-selling author and columnist for *Charisma Leader* magazine. His book *Courage to Be Healed: Finding Hope to Restore Your Soul* releases September 3, 2019. Rutland is president of Global Servants and the National Institute of Christian Leadership, having served previously as the pastor of a megachurch and president of two universities. Rutland and his wife, Alison, have been married and in ministry together for more than fifty years. They have three children and nine grandchildren. Through their ministry, Global Servants, the Rutlands established House of Grace in Chiang Rai, Thailand, a home to protect tribal girls from sex trafficking. Since 1986 House of Grace has been “saving little girls for big destinies.” Additionally, in five countries in

West Africa, Global Servants has built churches and village hygiene services, among other things.