

5 Ways to Respond When Your Pastor Falls

In recent days, there has been no shortage of high-profile pastor fails. If you don't follow the news sites that record the commentary on such things, you haven't missed out on anything. Most of these are men you have never heard of; never been to their churches; never read their books.

Frankly, all of these pastoral blow-ups seem to run together—someone had an affair, engaged in sexual misconduct, succumbed to unchecked substance abuse, embezzled church funds. The list shamefully goes on and on. And with every renewed news cycle, it appears that pastors continue to fall. I'm not throwing stones. Many of these are guys I do know, by reputation at least. I have read their books and follow their churches. A couple of these guys, in particular, have been formative in my development as a pastor.

My heart genuinely hurts when I see men with such fruitful influence fall so hard. I have compassion because I realize I'm just a few bad decisions from blowing up my own life.

It got me thinking though, what about the regular pastor? You know, the un-famous, run-of-the-mill, John Doe pastor (like most of us) in whom the cyber-universe isn't interested ... what happens when he falls? This question can be answered in multiple ways. I'm interested in answering this from the church's perspective, primarily because I've seen this done so poorly.

That is, how should a local church respond when its pastor falls?

1. With Transparency: Tell the truth. And quickly. And the whole truth. Churches should not be in the business of redacting information for the sake of public relations. The

bomb has already gone off people! Tell the church what happened. What did the pastor do? Who knew? How long has it been happening? When the pastor falls, the only first move a church has is to be open and honest with the people they serve.

2. With Firmness: With any pastoral failure, there is always a victim. Sometimes the victim is another church member, a child or the church itself. Churches must be steadfast with the language of wrongdoing. Grace and mercy come, of course. But churches cannot ever whitewash grievous sin with soft language.

3. With Vision: When a pastor falls, one of the first questions people will ask is “What will happen to the church?” That’s a reasonable question. Churches have to remember that moments of crisis require a renewed vision. Churches must call the people together and let them know the church is more than one person. The guy with the mic is not the one who determines the church’s longevity—the people are.

4. With a Plan. A pastoral shipwreck has the potential to put a church at the bottom of the ocean, unless the church leadership has a plan. Leaders must be specific about what the next step for their church is. For clarity, the first step in the plan should not be, “We’re firing the pastor.” That’s not a plan, that’s a knee-jerk response. I would suggest a plan that sounds something like this: We have put the pastor on leave; we have convened a team/committee to investigate the accusations; we are informing every church member of what has happened; we have secured a temporary pastor to carry the weekend load; we have asked a mediator or outside coach to help transition us to a place of church health.

5. With Grace. Ironically, churches that are supposed to be rooted in grace often use it sparingly with fallen pastors. When a pastor falls, the goal should not be to remove him as quickly as possible, but rather to restore him to a place of

wholeness. Of course, this will look different in every context, but the church must take personal responsibility for restoring this man's heart and family. *Restore* doesn't necessarily mean *reinstate* to a place of position, it simply means that churches choose to pastor the pastor as long as it takes. In doing this, churches model for their people that a failure isn't a death sentence. God restores, by his grace, even those who lead. {eoa}

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