

Why Ministry Hurts and What You Can Do About It

Sometimes ministry hurts. There's grief and pain for church leaders.

It's like a violent storm that comes from every angle against us. Discouragement. Depression. Quitting. Being fired. Wanting to turn your back on church and ministry.

Why is the downside of being in ministry so huge? And why does it hit all of us?

Prayerfully read on, church leader, to see how God wants to strengthen and encourage you today. There aren't easy answers. Just some perspective and hope.

Why Ministry Hurts

Why does ministry hurt so much?

1. **Imperfect people do imperfect things.** It's the obvious starting place: Ministry hurts because people do and say things that are hurtful.

They may be ornery, oblivious or power-seeking. They may not mean to be hurtful or even realize that they hurt people. They may be sorry.

Or they may never admit their part in the hurt. We're surprised when people in church hurt other people, but we shouldn't be. We're still a bunch of sinners.

2. **The Evil One is the destroyer.** Let's not forget who is behind the hurt. It's not accidental. It's calculated to bring ruin and comes from the one who is out to kill, steal and destroy (John 10:10).
3. **We're blinded by our own perspective.** We got robbed

several years ago, and in the aftermath, we were surprised by how hypersensitive we were.

In an unusual turnaround of expectations, for the next few days, we expected sympathy and sensitivity from everybody. We felt violated. And with all the details of closing stolen credit cards and bank accounts, we were hurt, frustrated and angry. We couldn't think straight. We got easily irritated. We weren't our normal reasonable selves.

It's not easy to step away from the pain, to put it in perspective, or to move past it. Sometimes ministry hurts because all we can see is the offense and the offenders.

4. Church work is just plain hard. Peter Drucker has famously ranked the job of pastor as one of the four hardest professions. We're right alongside the president of the United States, university presidents and hospital CEOs ... at least we're in good company.

Why is ministry so hard?

Samuel Chand in *Leadership Pain* explains that in former days pastors only needed to preach and care for their flock. Now they need to run a much more complex organization involving buildings, finances, human resources and community partnerships. Not the usual seminary curricula.

In addition, our churches sit in the middle of a post-modern culture. Our church members can listen to the best preachers every time they slap on their headphones and go for a run. They only come to church a couple times a month.

The colloquialism "it's an uphill battle" comes to mind.

5. Your gifting leaves you weak in other areas. You may be a good preacher, but you don't like administration.

You may be full of vision and passion, but you disappoint people when you're not at their bedside.

You may be a great shepherd, but you can't move the church forward.

We bring our strengths to our ministry, but our weaknesses become the focal point of the criticism. We work harder, try to do better, wear stress like a badge and persevere for the sake of the gospel. But our weaknesses come hand in hand with our gifts.

6. You are caught in difficult circumstances. You didn't know that the senior pastor was going to resign in a cloud of dust two months after you arrived, and that the congregation wouldn't trust anyone for years.

You didn't foresee the chronic illness in your spouse, the rebelliousness in your kids or the financial struggles you would face. Our difficult circumstances manifest in symptoms of grief and stress.

The next time you're with other pastors, go behind the "how big is your church" facade and quietly ask how they are really doing.

You'll find that everyone has difficult circumstances.

7. You expected it to be easier. It would have been good to know when you went into ministry what it was really going to be like. We didn't know that most churches don't grow, and that growth, when it does come, brings new challenges.

I don't know why we expected a world of easy blessing. It wasn't easy for any of the leaders in the Bible:

- David hid in a cave from the murderous Saul.
- Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son.
- Moses had millions of malcontents.
- Paul was beaten, stoned, shipwrecked and so on.
- And Jesus bore our sins on the cross.

As you've noticed, leadership pain is normal. It isn't a mistake. It's God's proving ground.

What to Do About the Ministry Pain You're Facing

1. **Run to Jesus.** You may feel too numb to practice spiritual disciplines or to expect anything resembling hope or joy.

Let me gently suggest that you need to get out of town like Elijah. You need extended time alone with Jesus.

Find a cave and bring your complaints to God. Listen for his voice. He got you into this mess. Let him get you out of it. Let him comfort you, and like Elijah, let him strengthen you (1 Kings 19).

If you can't manage an overnight prayer retreat, here's how Lorne Sanny, former Navigators president, recommends you spend a day in prayer:

2. **Embrace the pain and decide to grow.** Easier said than done, I know.

When you realize that the worst thing to do is to go numb and ignore the pain, and the best thing to do is to decide that you won't give up, then you're ready to see from Jesus how to grow through this.

You can do it.

You may never have expected Hebrews 12:7a (CSB) to speak to the pastor, but it does: "Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons."

And "Later on, however, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11b).

3. **Find someone to talk to.** Maybe you're one of the lucky

ones, and you have someone around who will listen to you.

Most pastors are too isolated to share their heaviest burdens. If that's your situation, then pay someone to talk with you.

I'm not kidding. Get a counselor to help you work through what you're feeling and how you can learn from your situation.

You'll make progress, you'll feel better and you never have to worry about your counselor betraying you or leaving you.

4. **Get out of town for a short vacation.** Or take a longer time away if you can manage it. Go camping. Use Groupon to find a deal to take the kids to a water park. Or take your spouse on a weekend getaway.

Do something fun and different. Get some fresh air and a new point of view. Let your problems fade in importance.

I'm often surprised at how much lighter my load feels when I'm out of town.

Here's how to get away if it seems too hard: "Why Pastors Should Get Away Every Summer—and How to Make it Work."

5. **Manage your own expectations.** Ministry is hard. But hard things don't need to floor you. Somehow, it's a little less discouraging when you decide to see challenges as a normal part of life, and when you embrace the principle that God uses pain to grow leaders.

6. **Stand on God's Word.** Open up your Bible and read Psalm 31.

Here are some highlights:

"Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in trouble; my eye wastes away with grief, yes, my soul and my body" (Ps. 31:9, MEV).

"Oh, how great is Your goodness, which You have laid up for

those who fear You, which You have done for those seeking refuge in You before people! You will hide them in the secret of Your presence from conspirators; You will keep them secretly in a shelter from the strife of tongues. Blessed be the Lord, for He has shown me His marvelous lovingkindness in a fortified city” (Ps. 31:19-21).

“Be strong, and He will strengthen your heart, all you who wait for the Lord” (Ps. 31:24).

Here are a few more: Isaiah 40:28-31, Joshua 1:7-9, Lamentations 3 and Ephesians 6:10-18. Or go back and read your old favorites again.

Let God speak to you through His Word, and He will ease your ministry pain.

What's Next?

Read Samuel R. Chand's book, *Leadership Pain*, for a deep dive in learning how to use your pain for growth. Chand advises that you should continually raise your threshold for leadership pain because you will only grow as a leader to the limit of the pain you are willing to face.

I see hope for you. {eo}

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