

HELP YOUR PASTOR PREACH WELL

A Preach Well Church

How Churches Can Stop Burning Out Pastors

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Free Chapter · Chapter One

The full book is available on Amazon.

Panic Attacks and Preaching

“The anxieties, which we feel in connection with our pulpit work, are enough to make us old before our time.”

— Charles Spurgeon

Pastor A feels stressed and overwhelmed as his church experiences a steady decline in membership. Covid has hastened the decline. Despite efforts to evangelize, they are not seeing any growth. Surrounding churches have more resources and programming for children and youth.

Pastor B struggles to balance work, sermon preparation, spending time with his family, and visiting church members. He is often stressed to his breaking point.

Pastor C’s church is facing financial disaster. The church has been hemorrhaging money for months, and the account is on track to be completely dry by the end of the month. Pastor C is terrified of what this means for his church and family.

Pastor D is facing a lot of stress as his church plant negotiates taking over an older congregation. There is likely to be much resistance to change from some older church members.

Pastor E’s church is growing rapidly, and he is struggling to keep up. He is working long hours, and his stress levels are through the roof. One day, he collapses from exhaustion and is hospitalized. His doctor tells him that if he doesn’t take some time to relax, he is at risk of having a heart attack.

Pastor F is always on the go, rushing from one meeting to the next. He never seems to have time to rest. Recently, he had a breakdown. He started having panic attacks. Eventually, he stepped down to get some rest and recover.

Pastor G is under a great deal of stress. He is guiding his church through changes and updates. The church asked him to make these updates, but the congregation is not always willing to follow through with these changes. Pastor G is trying to balance the church’s needs with the congregation’s wishes.

Pastor H is working hard to revitalize a church that has been struggling due to a drop in attendance. After all their revitalization efforts, the church decided to close. Pastor H and his

wife have been offered positions outside the church and are in the process of transitioning.

Pastor I and his wife have decided to resign from their ministry because of the stress and toxicity that has come with it. They have endured gossip and outright lies to malign their character. Despite seeing fruit in their ministry, it has become untenable, and their family is facing joblessness and homelessness.

Pastor J has struggled emotionally since some church members left his church. They left the church and went to another without telling Pastor J why. This has left Pastor J with so many questions.

Pastor K feels like he cannot meet his congregation's expectations. Every Sunday, he stands in front of them to preach and feels like they expect him to be dynamic, insightful, and inspirational, but he doesn't feel like any of those things. He feels like a fraud.

Pastor L will preach his last sermon tomorrow before his church closes its doors after more than a century of ministry. He feels like a failure, and he wrestles with feelings of depression and guilt. He blames himself for the situation. He's praying for wisdom and strength for tomorrow.

These are just a few examples of pastors in real-life crisis, but they are not unique. Many more pastors are reluctant to open up about their struggles. Pastors all around the country are struggling to keep their churches alive. Many churches face closure, and their pastors feel overwhelmed and stressed to their breaking point. If you're a pastor, this book is for you, but, more importantly, if you are a church member who loves their pastor and the preaching of God's word, this book is for you!

The Problem

A special issue of *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* provided examples of research on how work-related psychological health, stress, and burnout can affect clergy. The magazine had six empirical articles and five book reviews based on research among clergy in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The study found that clergy burnout is a common problem, no matter what religious denomination or country the clergy are from.

Clergy frequently experience stressful situations. They provide grief counseling and officiate funerals. Nearly one-quarter of all people in the United States seek help from clergy for help with mental illnesses. Clergy often negotiate tricky situations, such as what role the church should play in the surrounding community and how to spend limited church funds. Those communities around churches vary. Some communities are doing well and growing, while others seem to be dying. Such situations do not seem to have right or wrong answers, exposing

clergy to criticism. Within a single congregation, church members may have differing views on how to proceed, making it impossible for clergy to satisfy everyone. And on top of all that, church members often have different expectations of the pastor's family.

In 2014, 1 in 4 pastors admitted they have struggled with mental illness. Half of those pastors said the illness had been diagnosed. Stress has been a big problem for Southern Baptist ministers especially. In 2002, the number one and two medications prescribed were for stress-related diseases.

The Sweet Torture of Sunday Morning

The regular preaching of God's word to God's flock is a sacred trust that demands the utmost devotion. In pastoral ministry, preaching rapidly becomes a "burdensome joy," as James Earl Massey dubbed it. In an interview titled "The Sweet Torture of Sunday Morning," Gardner C. Taylor said, "There is a sense, of course, in which preaching is an albatross on all of us. I go through a dreadful time on Sunday mornings getting ready to preach. Sometimes I pass laborers on my way to church and wish I were doing anything except having to come over here and get into that pulpit again." Massey also describes the burden of preaching as "an inward pressure—indeed, as a distress." He says that this feeling can be caused by many things, like our fears or doubts about our abilities, not being able to accomplish what we want, failure, or our creative juices running dry. All of these fears can make preachers want to give up!

In an interview, when asked how preaching had affected him personally, Haddon Robinson responded, "There are all kinds of things happening in me that would shock the people in the pew if they knew. The trumpet doesn't give an uncertain sound, but there are times when a trumpeter is uncertain." Inevitably preachers come to the place when they think, 'Who am I to preach this?' That clouds your life. Robinson related how his wife could easily ruin him on almost any given Sunday if she just asked him when he got home from preaching, "How committed are you? Is that really true about you?" Robinson answers, "Yes, it is true. But not totally true. I can easily be made to feel like a hypocrite."

Henry Baker Adams, professor of pastoral theology at Yale Divinity School, explains that it is fitting for preachers to experience exceptional stress. It is audacious to speak on behalf of the Almighty. He maintains that the preacher should spend much time meditating on what it entails to stand behind the sacred desk. Talk of sufficiency betrays one's lack of appreciation for the high responsibility and heavy burden of preaching. The prophets depended upon God to sustain them because ultimately preaching is supernatural. Only divinely-given capacities can accomplish the task.

The Essential Stress of Preaching

Hans Selye, the father of stress research, defined stress as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand.” Based on this definition, no one can avoid stress. Donald H. Weiss observes in *Managing Stress*, “When something happens, we react to it. Stress is a part of our interpretation of the events in our situation. Only the dead cannot react to the world around them or inside themselves.” Not all so-called “stressors” are inherently bad stress. The human body reacts in the same manner to any stress, good (eustress) or bad (distress). The excitement of preaching a sermon can be as stressful as confronting an upset church member after a church business meeting. Both eustress and distress place similar demands on the human body and can wreak havoc.

So, experiencing stress related to preaching does not mean there is something wrong with the pastor. Not experiencing stress at all would seem more questionable. There is an essential stress to preaching. The hours that preachers put into praying and preparing a sermon strain the mind and the body. They wrestle with honest questions regarding the text and the discrepancies they perceive in their own lives. Preachers pour themselves out, pleading with listeners to repent of their sins and wholeheartedly entrust themselves to Christ. Often, no one seems to change. It’s also not unusual for fatigue to set in after the adrenaline rush of preaching. There are reasons preachers talk about the “Monday Blues.”

The Priority of Preaching

Some may think that if preaching is so stressful, just let it go, but that would diminish its biblical importance. The New Testament repeatedly teaches that a pastor is responsible for preaching the Word. As to the priority of preaching in the pastor’s ministry, the Apostle Paul charges young pastor Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:1–2 to preach the Word with five preceding intensifiers. “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: Preach the word” (2 Timothy 4:1–2). John Piper writes, “There is nothing quite like it anywhere else in Scripture...I am not aware of any other biblical command that has such an extended, exalted, intensifying introduction.” He continues, “I doubt that anyone has ever overstated the seriousness that Paul is seeking to awaken here.”

To be this kind of preacher, you must devote a significant amount of time and effort every week to faithfully complete the task, but, once the realities of overseeing a church kick in, pastors don’t devote as much time as they should to preaching and prayer. In addition, many church members have been under-disciplined as to preaching’s importance. While some church members won’t outright say it, many want their pastors to operate like successful CEOs or

hospital chaplains rather than preachers of God's Word. "Of course," they say, "it goes without saying that preaching is important." Still, that sentiment betrays that preaching has been overshadowed by something more important, and leading and instructing a church about the priority of preaching is not an easy endeavor.

To keep preaching the priority in the pastor's ministry will significantly shift the way things have always been done for most church members. It will be exceedingly difficult for the pastor who wants to impart this biblical vision and shepherd them in this old but new way of church life. However, let's say you are convinced that the preaching of the Word is the most important ministry of the pastor. What can church members do to help keep preaching as the priority of the pastor's ministry, or as I say it: help pastors preach well?

A Shared Burden

Preachers are often surrounded by people, but that does not mean they receive support from them. Besides other preachers, few people understand the isolation of the preacher. One survey found that 23 percent of pastors "sometimes get the social and emotional support [they] need," while 6 percent "rarely" or "never" get it. When preachers do reach out to others for help to cope with ministry demands, they usually speak to their spouses. Research participants were asked: "What relationships have been most significant in supporting and empowering your preaching ministry?" The most significant support comes from the preacher's relationship with his wife. Research participants also were asked: "How do you evaluate your sermon?" A preacher asks his wife for feedback on the message.

Confiding in and sharing emotions with someone makes you feel less lonely and stressed. This is often helpful, even if you don't get any new ideas or observations. Sadly, some preachers do not feel comfortable talking about their problems with other preachers in their local associations and state conventions because they feel like there is too much competition between them. In addition, preachers sometimes feel it is risky to be transparent with church members. Even if they take the plunge and are rewarded with a reliable friendship with a fellow church member, it often doesn't last long because people move to other churches or communities. However, preachers mustn't face pastoral stress alone.

When a preacher exhibits symptoms of distress, it is often difficult for local churches to address the issue gently and frankly. Church members perceive "something is off" with the preacher. He is different from what he used to be, but they cannot pin down the cause. The church may choose to look the other way, hoping it will resolve on its own. All the while, the preacher may be unaware of the problem, too embarrassed to address it, or does not know how to approach the church about it.

Most churches want their preachers to be successful, but they don't always know how to help them. Often this happens not because of intentionally destructive choices and habits but because of sheer neglect. Churches too easily end up with patterns of behavior that make it harder for the pulpit and the pew. Churches can fix this by setting reasonable minimal commitments to help create a "Preach Well" church.

Commitments of a Preach Well Church

A Preach Well Church is a church whose concern for the overall well-being of their pastor reflects their priority for the preaching of the Word. Each chapter in this book is a commitment developed from research to help churches help their pastors preach well. Each commitment has clear, concrete actions that preachers and churches can prayerfully consider to create a church culture conducive to keeping preaching as the priority of the pastor's ministry. The following commitments should be tailored to fit a specific church's unique context, purpose, and financial ability.

Also included in each chapter is "A Word to Pastors." No matter your job or who you are, you will experience stress. Preachers can do some things to help them not feel stressed before, during, and after preaching. Those who address the following problems are more likely to become better pastors and preachers.

The Research

Historical and contemporary homileticians and pastors' written works and stories about their firsthand experiences with stress related to pastoral ministry and preaching were reviewed. An online survey was designed according to this literary research and distributed to Georgia Southern Baptist pastors. The survey questions were adapted from portions of older vocational clergy surveys and asked about preaching, stress, and coping mechanisms. At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they were willing to contribute to several more open-ended questions about their personal experience with stress.

The research study looked at 97 Georgian Southern Baptist pastors. The pastors were chosen because they are responsible for preaching regularly. The study focused on senior pastors, including "solo" pastors. These pastors usually preach at least once a week to the same congregation. This limitation was put in place to focus on how preaching affects the stress of the pastor who preaches weekly to the same people.

These Georgian Southern Baptist preachers were a reasonably homogenous group. 98% were male. 82% were older than 45 years old. 93% were white. 97% were married. 83% completed some degree of higher education. 68% were from a rural setting. 23% served as a

bi-vocational minister (employed as a preacher and in another job outside of ministry), and 53% served as a full-time employee (40 or more hours per week) by a church. 44% served as a Senior Pastor (other ministry roles on staff), and 39% served as a Solo Pastor (only preacher on staff). Still, the results may well apply to pastors of other congregationally governed churches and possibly to other denominations.

Summary

Clergy burnout studies have consistently shown that clergy members feel a lot of stress, no matter their denomination or country. Pastors often feel burdened by preaching. But even so, preaching should be the priority of the pastor's ministry. This book aims to equip churches with a better understanding of how the ministry, preaching in particular, affects their pastors' stress and with practices they can commit to in order to help their pastors preach well. In the next chapter, churches are challenged to take The Control Commitment and let go of control over their preacher's schedule.

THE STORY CONTINUES

Keep Reading

This is Chapter One of *A Preach Well Church*. The rest of the book turns the research into seven concrete commitments a church can make to help its pastor preach well, each paired with a candid “Word to Pastors.”

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