

The Challenge of Clergy Isolation During COVID-19 Days

Most pastors didn't have "Global Pandemic" on their calendar for Spring 2020. Yet, faithful pastors continue to do what it is that they have been given to do as they care for their sheep and lambs, preaching the Word in season and out.

Many pastors are well acquainted with the essential spiritual care resources available to provide self and others with comfort, strength and guidance during these days of uncertainty. Yet, it is also useful to examine the likely psychological impact of isolation on the pastor and his people and to explore some resources and helpful responses to these unexpected days.

What are the Common Results of Isolation?

Keep in mind, there isn't a single response to isolation which fits all individuals. Extroverts now find themselves in a social famine, no longer interacting and recharging easily with others to sharpen their wit and share their world. Introverts, despite the 24/7 need to be spouse/father/homeschool teacher and pastor, are likely to find any time of isolation to be welcome recharge moments. Our personalities and personal histories shape our response to isolation uniquely, yet there are some common responses to isolation which you may be detecting in your life or the life of others.

Loss and Grieving

One of the first casualties of isolation is a loss of the privilege to pastor people in time honored ways. Feelings of loss and sadness are to be expected. Ministry changes during COVID-19 days are new and unwelcome. Pastors may recall their busiest times at church, wondering how they could have failed to be wholly grateful for all of the people and the many demands of ministry. Yet other pastors may appear stoic, preferring to grieve losses privately, and choosing to express their loss and grief to others as complaint.

Weariness/Stress/ Frustration

As isolation wears on, people may feel fatigued, sleep poorly, and experience some loss of cognitive clarity or focus. Admittedly, these days are stressful and pastors are doing battle with technology and determining how to respond to the public health prohibitions of public services and private visitations. Yet, like everyone else, pastors are mostly at home to "flatten the curve." Family members in isolation can become frustrated and irritable as everyone is jostled together constantly with new schedules, habits and responsibilities. The chronic stress occasionally exacerbates pre-existing marital or parenting issues. Pastors may appear less patient and more weary than usual in dealing with the requirements of ministry and daily family life.

Worry/Anxiety

There are sheep without a shepherd at home, in hospitals, ICUs, nursing homes and hospice care. There are families turning to pastors, unable to access their loved ones in professional care settings. Pastors have a congregation that needs to worship, to meditate and to study God's Word. How could a pastor be left unmoved? The church's finances may be dwindling and pastors need to make the best decisions they can. Personal financial realities may loom large as well. Anxiety worsens when a pastor obsesses about all these matters in the privacy of his heart without benefit from the care and counsel of lay leaders and brothers in office. Chronic anxiety can be a gateway to depression or despair.

Unflattering Personal Appraisals

Video worship resources now allow pastors and their people to hear sermons preached from pulpits across the country. Laity can join other pastors' families online as they pray Matins, Compline or Evening Prayer. Congregational members are enjoying Bible studies conducted by pastors they've never met. Pastors can celebrate the wealth of resources offered by their brothers in Christ who variously teach, pray, preach, sing read and encourage the flock. However, pastors can also be tempted to do some comparisons many haven't done since Hom I and Hom II. Pastors may not have even seen or heard themselves preach since leaving the seminary and could be surprised, alarmed or even discouraged by what they see and hear on their first COVID-19 video sermon.

"Not Doing Enough"/Loss of Perspective

Even the most conscientious pastor may imagine he is "not doing enough." One discouraged pastor reported he had learned about a brother who was doing 20 Divine Services a week, with no more than 10 attending each service. The pastor said that by comparison, he felt like a failure in office. The research reports that the greater one's isolation, the less likely one is to accurately perceive what is going on around him and he may well put the worst construction on everything. Worse, the more isolated a pastor is, the more likely he is to regard his perceptions as correct and beyond dispute. Guilt and feelings of inadequacy can become a chronic and unwelcome burden even for the faithful pastor.

Powerlessness/Despair

With each passing week of COVID-19, the pastor remains powerless to bring his flock back within the church walls. He may slip into some unhealthy habits of emotional resignation, "coasting" or "just treading water," believing his efforts won't make any significant difference. Isolation, frustration and hours at the computer may also seduce a pastor into the spiritual, moral and psychological black hole of internet porn – a sure doorway to despair. Pastors who cling to hope in Christ's promises find that they can persevere indefinitely – albeit one day at a time. Others who've come to believe that the situation is truly hopeless and beyond timely reversal may well move towards increased sadness, if not despair.

Healthy Responses for Pastors and Their Families

Happily, there are some sure and certain ways to abate the impact of clergy isolation.

Spiritual Resources

Review and embrace the transformational spiritual care resources you have always valued: personal study of the Word studied, preached, prayed, sung and taught. You cannot give to others what you have not received. Rooted in God's extraordinary gifts of the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, you can move beyond dwelling in anxiety and hopelessness. You can be confident that by the grace of God you will be steadfast and that He will equip you to persevere. During some of your computer time, explore in detail the many print and video resources you can access via DOXOLOGY's website, including our new "Ministry in Plague Time" page. <https://www.doxology.us/ministry-in-plague-time-covid-19/>

Psychological Resources

Connect and be candid – Bear in mind that some of your isolation is self-imposed. Do NOT rely on your nuclear family to meet all of your social needs and to insulate you from isolation. Call, text, Zoom and Facetime your friends. Connect with distant family members and encouraging congregants. Renewing conversations begin with the simple inquiry, "How's it going?" There's no room for pretense in these days. Be willing to give and receive love and encouragement. Share your impressions about hopes, fears, successes, losses and disappointments. You'll usually find genuine comfort and

understanding if you're willing to talk about worries and "failures" – whether real or imagined. Let "Connections" be a time of day on your schedule which you anticipate happily. (Notice the word "schedule" implies that you actually have a plan for your days...a GREAT idea.)

PLAN time for distractions from your work

Ensure that there's time to play with the kids, to be silly, to draw, to paint, to do family reading and to play games before your Netflix binges. Enjoying time with you in positive ways reduces the need for children to get your attention in less winsome ways. Get everyone up, bathed, dressed and tending to their assigned chores and responsibilities (school work or adult work-at-home needs.) If possible, get out of the house daily. Walk together, wave at your neighbors. Delight in them (from a distance of six feet). Run. Bike. Hike. Exercise! Be away from the four walls of your study and your home. Delight in new landscapes. Animal shelter adoptions are off the chart: need a new friend? Cook something wonderful with the family. Be present fully in your family's life. Find time to reconnect with your spouse, perhaps a quiet walk together or time at the close of each day to debrief and to encourage one another with the reflections of the day and shared prayer.

Disconnect from the noise

Often a sense of helplessness and worry is fed by chronic exposure to the 24/7 media roar of talking heads. Take a break from the play-by-play press conferences and the non-stop COVID-19 news cycle which is routinely disturbing and alarming. Find a reliable source of information and check in only intermittently for facts and updates. Share age appropriate, hopeful news with your children.

Notice What You're Telling Yourself: Find the Misconceptions and Feed Your Mind Well

What you tell yourself powerfully influences how you feel. If you mentally rehearse a *negative perspective on any situation* you set yourself up for discouragement and despair (e.g., COVID-19 is nothing but a successive series of overwhelming constraints, burdens and obstacles.) Or, if you've begun to adopt a *negative view of yourself*, (e.g., I'm less faithful than others, less capable than others and less productive than others) you'll have difficulty receiving others' encouragement and affirmation. If you've adopted a *negative view of the future* (COVID-19 leaves me with no reason to believe things will be better any time soon; and, there's nothing but hardship and discouragement ahead), you're likely to disengage from facts and marinate in despair.

Be mindful of your habits of thought and make choices regarding what you will allow yourself to dwell upon. Biblical truths are routinely better at informing us about ourselves, our hope and our future. Read what uplifts you. Talk with those you encourage you. Perhaps you can create a playlist of hymns which inspire you. Or, maybe you can make it a point to sing your favorite Christian music aloud. Fill your mind with what is good, right and salutary. Think on these things.

Cultivate a Spirit of Thanksgiving

Be grateful for the gifts you've detected in the face of adversity. Notice the good which God has allowed for you to give and to receive. Prayerfully name the people in your life that day who have been a blessing. Gratefully recall the unexpected moments of success, joy, satisfaction or peace. Continue to pray for the people in your life who may be physically distant at the moment, to whom you draw near in remembrance of their gifts to you through time. We are never more alone than when we live entirely in one moment of time, disconnected from those who have loved and cared for us in the past, who love us now and who will continue to love us through whatever awaits.

Begin to Explore Self-Care Opportunities/Seek Professional Counsel

As challenges increase, some pastors choose to review self-care tips and strategies that may help them to reduce anxiety and move towards greater productivity. The American Psychological Association offers an array of self-care resources for caregivers which pastors may choose to explore:

<https://www.apa.org/pi/about/publications/caregivers/consumers/taking-care-you>

Pastors can often benefit from the opportunity to visit with a counselor to process matters which result in ongoing feelings of despair, anxiety or depression. Connecting with a brother pastor, your District's resource list, or The American Association of Christian Counselors, can help you to identify a counselor to whom you can turn with confidence. https://connect.aacc.net/?search_type=distance.

Teletherapy is now available in many settings, allowing you to seek care privately at home and without the hassle of travel. Your insurer may suggest the name of covered providers who can offer this service.

Finally, many pastors have come to understand that no matter what the pastoral challenge - every pastor needs a pastor to bring him the sweet Word of absolution, pastoral wisdom care, counsel, prayer and blessing. To whom might you turn to find comfort in some satisfying mutual conversation and consolation?

Please don't hesitate to connect with any of us if we can be helpful.

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