



# WHEN PASTORS NEED A HELPING HAND

By Al Ells, M.C

National surveys indicate that ministers are possibly the most frustrated and neglected professional group in the country. Up to date studies are scarce and some of these surveys are dated, but they still tell a relevant story.

*Forty percent of surveyed pastors express a desire to leave the pastorate<sup>1</sup> and of 1,400 ministers questioned, fewer than 20 percent report receiving any kind of annual recognition.<sup>2</sup> H.B. London, from Focus on the Family says, “We have found that most members of the clergy feel isolated, insecure, and only rarely affirmed.”*

Focus on the Family surveys<sup>3</sup> have revealed that the institution of the church is undergoing serious difficulty:

- ⤴ Many local churches are barely surviving, with approximately 3,000-4,000 of them closing their doors every year.
- ⤴ Approximately 1,500 pastors leave their assignments each month, due to moral failure, spiritual burnout or contention within their local congregation.
- ⤴ Weekly attendance at U.S. religious activities has declined from 49 percent to 37 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Most religious leaders believe that as the church goes so does the nation (II Chronicles 7:14). It appears that our leaders and our churches are experiencing great difficulty, and our nation is suffering the effect.

To better understand the difficulties that Christian leaders experience, consider the following occupation issues that clergy and other leaders must face and resolve in order to be successful:

## **HIGH EXPECTATIONS**

Clergy have great difficulty meeting the complex personal, relational and organizational challenges they face. Expectations of clergy are possibly greater than those of any other

<sup>1</sup> Focus on the Family, 1998

<sup>2</sup> Lifeway Christian Resources

<sup>3</sup> Focus on the Family, 1998

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

professional group. According to pollster George Barna, 73 percent of surveyed Americans expect clergy to live up to higher standards of moral and ethical conduct than they expect of themselves or others.<sup>5</sup> Even the President of the United States is not expected to live up to the moral code of behavior of a clergyman. No other vocation is required to represent God to a generation of sophisticated, materialistic, entertainment-prone audiences who need to be told truths that they don't want to hear.

## **FEARS OF FAILURE AND INADEQUACY**

When crowds are not easily pleased, or personal and organizational problems arise, clergy feel inadequate and fear failure. Ninety percent of surveyed clergy report they were inadequately trained to cope with the high demands of ministry, and 50 percent feel unable to meet the current needs of the job<sup>6</sup>. When faced with the fears and the pressures of ministry, many become depressed—80 percent of pastors are discouraged or are dealing with depression<sup>7</sup>—or retreat into unhealthy coping behaviors. For example, 37 percent of surveyed pastors admit to inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church.<sup>8</sup>

## **HIGH LEVELS OF CONFLICT**

Clergy are exposed to a significant amount of conflict on a regular basis, often leading to dismissal. In 1998, Dr. Fred Gage stated that 6,000 Southern Baptist Church pastors leave the ministry each year and 225 are fired each month.<sup>9</sup> A Fuller Institute study reported that 40 percent of surveyed ministers report a serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month. And 75 percent reported a significant stress-related crisis at least once a month in their ministry.<sup>10</sup> *Leadership Magazine* says that 25 percent of those asked said they had been fired or forced to resign, normally by a faction of 10 people or fewer.<sup>11</sup>

## **DIFFERENT STANDARDS**

A major obstacle to wholeness is pastors' false belief that they are utter failures if their personal faith is not strong enough to overcome every problem. Though they often preach that God is magnified through our weaknesses (II Corinthians 12:9), they apply a different standard to themselves. They expect to be perfect or near perfect, not weak and sinful, relying on God's grace.

## **DYSFUNCTIONAL CHURCH SYSTEMS**

These pressures surrounding the clergy are often magnified by the dysfunctional church systems that many of them work within. Typically, the pastor has been the visionary, preacher, teacher and CEO, providing the leadership to an untrained volunteer board of elders, deacons or directors who do not fully understand their role, tend not to govern, or

---

<sup>5</sup> Barna, 1996 Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators

<sup>6</sup> Fuller Institute of Church Growth, 1991

<sup>7</sup> Focus on the Family, 1998

<sup>8</sup> Fuller Institute of Church Growth, 1991

<sup>9</sup> Wounded Heroes, 1998

<sup>10</sup> Fuller Institute of Church Growth, 1991

<sup>11</sup> *Leadership Magazine*

worse yet, micromanage the organization and pastor. The result is a dysfunctional organizational system led by a hurting pastor and passive or frustrated lay leadership.

If the pastor fails or is hurting, no one else really knows what to do. Most churches don't have boards of directors, deacons or elders who are trained in how to appropriately respond when the pastor and organization are in crisis. Many denominations have only recently developed programs for troubled clergy, but very few, if any, provide crisis intervention and organizational development expertise for dealing with conflict situations and organizational dysfunction.

## **HURTING FAMILIES**

Possibly the greatest disappointment for clergy is the sad and painful status of pastors' families. Eighty percent of those surveyed believe that pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families and 33 percent say that being in ministry is an outright hazard to their family.<sup>12</sup> When spouses of clergy were surveyed, 84 percent reported being discouraged and in depression.<sup>13</sup> Barna's research confirms the dire effects of ministry on families with 49 percent of surveyed pastors contending that their family life has suffered significantly as a result of the pressures and demand of their ministry.<sup>14</sup>

## **ISOLATION**

When faced with a crisis, or even normal life difficulties, their isolation compounds the problems. Seventy percent of those surveyed do not have someone they consider a close friend<sup>15</sup> who could serve as a confidant. Additionally, most report that at one time or another they confided in a member of the congregation or a church leader with disastrous results. As leaders they are afraid of being exposed and rejected for not measuring up. They fear hurting the congregation, and think they are a disappointment if others know how much they struggle. They rarely have safe, supportive and healthy relationships.

## **CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING SUGGESTION:**

Among the myriad suggestions for leaders on how to deal with the aforementioned problems, one stands out from the rest: ***Ministry leaders need to form close and healthy relationships with other leaders.*** Only another leader can fully identify with the difficulties of ministry and understand what God is doing and what needs to change.

When a man or woman of God is feeling pressured and harried, the last thing he or she may want is more pressure, especially pressure that demands change. Yet change is frequently what is needed. Too often men and women who serve God and sense His presence become too focused on the ministry and neglect their own lives and families. When problems arise, they go to great lengths to preserve the ministry instead of doing whatever it takes to

---

<sup>12</sup> Fuller Institute of Church Growth, 1991

<sup>13</sup> Focus on the Family, 1998

<sup>14</sup> Barna, 1996 Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators

<sup>15</sup> Fuller Institute of Church Growth, 1991

change personally as well. Ministry problems and personal problems always go hand in hand.

In times of crisis, ministry leaders need friends who can help them hold steady, as well as support what needs to be changed. They need healthy peer relationships with ministry friends who will “love at all times” (Proverbs 17:17) and “stick closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24). Leaders need other leaders!