

Ministry in the midst of wounds

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Authentic. For the last ten years, "authentic" seems to be a key word for ministers. I'm not sure when the shift happened, but when we work in multi-generational settings, the changing expectations can be palpable.

Perhaps it happened with social media. One part of the congregation wants to see a minister, in a black robe, proclaiming the Word with excellence. Another part of the congregation might be more comfortable with hanging out on Facebook, scrolling through goofy pictures of their pastor on vacation. "It just feels like you're more human," one member said after interacting with me on Twitter. "More authentic."

Or it could have been when we realized that there was as much (and often more) ministry being done in the 12-step groups in the basement of our churches than in the sanctuaries. People didn't have to be fake. They didn't have to dress up and pretend to be something that they were not. They could be authentic.

Or perhaps the shift happened with books like *The Wounded Healer*, where we began to realize that we did not need to stoically suppress our grief and ignore our traumas, but we could embrace and understand our own sorrows. Those tender places could be a communion, where we could learn to be *with* our parishioners, on a deeper emotional level. Just as we commune with Jesus, the man of sorrows, in his brokenness, we could be more authentic.

As important as it is to minister from those wounded places, to preach about real emotional issues, and to write from a place of spiritual depth, there is also danger in it—for us and for our communities. Here are some things we might want to remember.

**Minister from a place of health.** As pastors, writers, or even social media networkers, we often attract people who resonate with and complement us. Therefore, a larger community can begin to reflect the health or dysfunctions of its leaders.

If a pastor is an alcoholic, the congregation can become co-dependent. If a leader is an enabler, she can end up with a mildly abusive community. We shouldn't blame every organizational dysfunction on its leader, but there is a pattern that's important to understand.

So it's vital for leaders to keep on top of that "check up from the neck up" (as they say). See a therapist. Meet with a 12-step group. Seek spiritual direction. Take care of your mental health. You can be a minister with a truck-load of baggage, but you need to be actively engaged in the hard work of healing in order to be a healing presence with your community.

**Don't use the pulpit as your therapy couch.** There is a fine line between ministering from a broken place, and bleeding all over your congregation. If you cry when you're writing your sermon, that's okay. If you *cannot keep from* crying as you're preaching it, then the wound might be too fresh. Healing takes time, and you need to let that restoration take place before you rip off the bandage before a large group of people.

I make it a point to work through a particularly painful situation with a counselor before I preach on it. When a person is called to serve a congregation, there will be some ministry that the community will do for that person, but a leader's brokenness should not be the focus of the community's attention.

**Check your emotional vulnerability.** One time I dreamed that I was kayaking naked in a stream near our church. I woke up, realizing that I had left myself too vulnerable to my congregation. There are times when a community can be vicious. Sadly, there can be sharks that will swarm with the first hint of blood. There are moments when you can tell so much of your life, that it leaves you feeling unsafe. Be aware of the dynamic and trust your intuitions, if you believe that's happening.

Just as pastors have boundaries around schedules, space, and relationships, you will also want to maintain some emotional boundaries. This is important for the health of the community as well as for your own health.

Being authentic is vital for leadership in a new generation. Yet, we need to find a place outside of our communities to tend our wounds, rely on emotional support, and express our vulnerabilities. When we have plodded through our own shadowed valleys to the green pastures of emotional healing, then we can lead others on the same path.