

Lonely pastors

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I was helping out at my daughter's school, painting the walls. I got into a groove with another mother. She would hold the blue tape, and I would press it along the border. I used a small brush to do the detailed edging, while she would slather the wall with her roller. We talked about our kids, what they were taking and what program they were enrolled in. It's an arts magnet, so there are many ways a conversation can go, depending on the teen's major.

Finally, it went in that inevitable direction. "So, what do you do for a living?" she asked.

"I'm a writer."

"What do you write?"

"Religious stuff. I'm a pastor," I said.

Then it happened. The subtle shift. She started to refer to me with the word "ma'am." After a few moments, she found something else to do in another room and migrated, leaving me with a small brush and a big bucket of paint.

There's no feeling quite as depressing as a line of connection being suddenly cut short. Ministers have this sensation a lot. We're often lonely in a crowded room. There are reasons for this.

Reason#1: The invisible pedestal. One of the nice things about being in the Bible belt is that people really do have respect for the clergy. Newspaper journalists and television newscasters regularly ask our opinions on things, even when the subject matter is way outside of our realm of expertise. I get a flood of thank you notes, even when I do the smallest act. The respect and appreciation are obvious.

But there's another side to the pedestal. There is a sense of being set apart. People become embarrassed when they curse. They apologize when they drink a beer. They become self-conscious and concerned that they will offend us. In many ways, they don't feel like they can be themselves in front of us without being judged. It can all be overcome, but it takes a long time. And, in the meantime, it can be very lonely.

Reason #2: Our past social behaviors. Many of us created our social lives around our congregations before we went to seminary. That was part of the calling. We were accepted and loved in that group of people. When we became pastors all that changed.

I'm not saying that we can't be friends with parishioners. I reject that notion. But we can't always fall apart in front of them. We can't complain to them that the Treasurer is acting like the church's money is her money and is trying to block our cost of living increase. We can't become emotionally dependent on them. So, we have to learn how to make friends outside of church, which is hard when church was always our social outlet.

Reason #3: Our schedules. We often work at times when other people have off. Our nights, weekends, and holidays are crammed and so it's hard for us to fit in a life outside work. Most of us have to move every 3-5 years, and we often relocate into rural areas where people have been nurturing relationships with one another for years. Sometimes generations. They will be kind, but they're not quick to let you invade their inner circle of sisterhood.

But we must have friends. I talk to pastors who are way too depressed and anxious. We drink too much. We have no hobbies. We don't have a life outside of church. We freak out at the thought of retiring. Our identities are completely wrapped up in our vocation.

We go to a clergy group, and we find a bunch of preening egos. We sit there as the self-important pastors suck up all the oxygen, telling us about their work and resumes. There's no air left for any vulnerability, or even friendship.

Or our pastor-friends remain in relentless problem-solving mode and they can't handle hearing complaints without delivering a sermonette to us at the end of it. And we want to bang our heads on the table and cry, "I know what to do! I just want a little space to rant as I'm doing it!"

Many of us were able to go to residential seminaries. We know what it's like to build community and to have friends. We need to remind ourselves what that was like. What we were like. We have to remember how to complain, cry, laugh, or be utterly boring. We have to remind ourselves of that time when we didn't have to be the non-anxious presence or the wise one in the room. Do you remember? Now let's go find a place where we can go and be that person again. Text someone. Call them. Arrange dinner. Sign up for a conference. Set aside that time. The world needs that person back. And we all need friends.