

On the Practice of Ministry Leadership: *Overcoming Isolation*

Being a ministry leader is often an isolating experience. The challenges in your own church can cut you off from the outside world. The time demands and the disappointments and the people clamoring for your attention can wrap you up in a cocoon called “church.”

Isolation is not healthy for the same reasons that stagnation is not healthy for a body of water. So why does it happen to ministry leaders? I see three common reasons.

1) *Convenience*. In the short-run, isolation is easier than engagement with people outside of your church. It doesn't cause much immediate pain and it means one less thing you have to do in an already busy schedule.

2) *Discouragement and Potential Embarrassment*. When we perceive things aren't going well, often the last thing we want to do is go meet with someone who will ask us, “How are things going at your church?” Isolation feels better than having to deal with that question.

3) *Arrogance*. Some ministry leaders isolate themselves because they think they have it all figured out. They do not see the need for outside influences or a support network. They think, “I've got this.” Low teachability leads to low outside engagement.

These are real factors that push us toward isolation. I have experienced them myself. We need to recognize that isolation is dangerous. Some of the dangers of isolation are:

- Secrets and discouraging thoughts that gain power over us.
- Stunted growth as we cut ourselves off from outside influences.
- Restricted vision because we don't know what we don't know.
- Unhealthy emotions that don't get processed and corrected.
- The lack of a “safety net” to support us and strengthen us when we struggle.

In my interviews with long-tenured pastors of healthy churches, one of the things I learned is that these guys *built their own support networks*. They made relationships with peers, mentors, and groups outside of their churches a priority. These pastors all had the common problems that come with ministry leadership, but they didn't get “cocooned” in their churches. They went outside regularly for friendship, learning, and personal support. Over the years this practice helped them stay put, stay healthy, and stay focused on their calling.

Here are five insights about overcoming isolation I have gained from long-tenured pastors.

1) *See it as part of your work*. Engagement with people outside of your church is part of being a good shepherd for your church over the long haul. The things you learn, the accountability you

find, and the personal support you gain will be invaluable to both you and your church. I understand that some church members will not see it that way, but help them understand why it is important. (Lay leaders, assist your pastor with this. Help folks in the church understand why it is good for the pastor to stay connected outside of the church.)

2) *Make it part of your wellness plan.* Your long-term health in the ministry is related to your relational, intellectual, and emotional well-being. Just like going to the gym or eating a healthy diet, your people practices will have a cumulative effect over the years. Develop some healthy habits where your support network is concerned.

3) *Schedule it.* Make your regular outside church connections a priority in your calendar. Set the time aside, make a commitment to the people involved, and keep it. Don't wait for "things to settle down" or space to clear on your schedule. It never happens and you know it.

4) *Be a catalyst.* Chances are there are peers who would like to spend time with you, but they are afraid to ask because they perceive you are too busy. Pick up the phone. Be the instigator. Put a group together for lunch or for a book discussion or to attend a conference together. Identify something you would like to learn and then seek out a coach in that area. Don't sit back and wait for your support network to magically appear. Build it.

5) *Be real.* This can be tough for ministry leaders who gain their self-esteem from how others view them. I encourage you not to be that person. Get your self-esteem from how God feels about you. I believe the cross has forever settled that issue. In Christ, you are freed up to be a normal person who struggles with some things. You are freed up to be transparent, teachable and positively-influenced by others. You are also freed up to be a non-arrogant and non-posing presence in their lives, which will be a blessing to both of you.

Fellow ministry leaders, I am endeavoring to practice what I preach. I am part of a book discussion group with other ministry leaders (kudos to Mike Phillips of FBC Wimberley for being the catalyst on this). We meet twice a month for lunch and to discuss whatever book we are reading, which usually leads to a side discussion of some issue one of us is dealing with. I am also part of a group of South Texas DOMs who get together quarterly for a day to talk about the ministry of assisting churches. And whenever I hear about a long-tenured pastor in a healthy church, I try and schedule an interview with him. This ongoing Tenure Project keeps me in touch with guys outside of the association and keeps me learning about the factors that influence pastoral tenure and church health.

Bottom line: Overcoming isolation is not easy. It requires intentionality and commitment, but it's worth it. Disease breeds in a stagnant pond, so keep the water moving!