

The Loneliness of Ministry

Steve Alley

Ministry leadership is a lonely place! This is the very opposite of what a person might imagine ministry leadership to be! Those who dream about leading a ministry might imagine a very high level of “popularity” and many close friends. While ministry leaders are “popular,” their position may reduce the number of close friends. Yes, ministry leaders may be surrounded by people who “know” them, but as the years go on, the number of actual, “safe” friends with whom a ministry leader can confide reduces. You may have experienced the loneliness of ministry. If you haven’t yet, you will probably taste this bitter fruit of ministry sometime in your leadership years. It is the same loneliness that Jesus, Paul, every pastor and every missionary has experienced. It is one of the most difficult aspects of your calling.



Most ministry leaders are "people persons." You probably build people, create teams and build friendships. The unfortunate factor of ministry leadership is that you elevate to a level that isolates you. You know, see, and decide things that others either can't know about or can't understand. Every pastor experiences this loneliness. The senior pastor of a church has the potential to be the loneliest person in the church. He can share things with his board, the elders, and his associate pastors, but he can't share everything, and many times he can't rely on others' counsel. Pastors rely on their spouses for comfort and understanding. Sometimes, their spouses don't understand everything because they haven't been a part of every decision, counseling session and meeting. The pastor can very carefully "dump on" or "open up to" fellow associate pastors, close friends, or secretaries; but every one of those connections has a long list of cautions attached to any "transparent communication." This is why pastors play golf. On the golf course, they talk about the "stuff" of ministry with others who most likely don't attend their church.



You may build strong, “safe” relationships with a few people at church. This is very good! These select close friends are strong, biblical people who can possibly caution, exhort, or direct you. Unfortunately, these people often come and go in ministry. Life happens, and these close people are often taken away by their jobs or other personal reasons. If you build a few close relationships at church and they don’t move away, thank the Lord daily for these friends!

When your good friends or supportive partners in ministry leave, this will drive you to consider why their leaving affects you so deeply. Yes, God could prevent good friends from leaving the church, but sometimes He doesn't. After a few of these "leavings," pastors become a bit hardened. They don't let themselves open up to others as easily. They retreat into their own lives and become even more isolated...and lonely.

What can you do to prevent yourself from becoming a lonely ministry leader? Books have been written about this challenge, and hundreds of seminars or workshops have been taught about it. The "bottom line" of the books and seminars is for us in ministry to rely on God for our comfort, and to work hard at finding fellowship from "safe" people. The circle of fellowship widens beyond the church membership. Of course, your spouse is the top of your safest person

list; but, you can also find safe fellowship with ministry leaders at other churches. It is these people who can step into the gap left by close friends who leave. Although making connections with other ministry leaders at other churches is a good thing, you must be careful not to be too “needy.” A tired, lonely ministry leader who seeks human closeness may unwittingly step into a relationship that can destroy a marriage and a ministry! Be very careful of friendship relationships with people of the opposite sex!

Pastors have discovered the dangerous waters of finding companionship and fellowship with people of the opposite sex. This is a danger of “opening up” to a church secretary or administrative assistant. It's good to be able to talk about deep things, but it can quickly lead to something that endangers the marriage. So, finding ministry leaders, of the same sex, who you can share feelings with and bounce ideas off, is a great idea. This doesn't mean that you won't have good friendship with those on your ministry teams, but it does mean that the “fluid” nature of people will be balanced a bit.



If your community has an established ministry network, join it. If there is a ministry conference nearby, attend it. These are both great ways to connect with a fellow ministry leader (of the same sex) at another local church. If you don't have one of these networking opportunities, you can create a fellowship of ministry leaders in the community yourself. Invite CM leaders from 3 or 4 local churches to join you for coffee or tea at a local coffee shop. Don't have any agenda, just ask God to help you build connections. You can guarantee that you aren't the only ministry leader who is feeling lonely. These small, informal gatherings can build into a network of “safe” relationships that assist you in flourishing in the ministry.



With today's social media, you may also make significant connections online. Of course, you may not share the same local area, but you can still talk about “deep things” with others who understand your challenges. Use Zoom, Google Meet, or Facetime to enhance the conversations.

God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.” (Genesis 2:18) I think He was making a general statement about His creation of humans. I don't think this statement just refers to males. I believe it refers to us humans generally. We are “herding” creatures! We need other people. Even introverted people need to be with others periodically! May God bring close “safe” friends to you as you lead your ministry!