

Jeff's Jottings
October 4, 2019

Church, We Have a Problem

The news came last week in an innocuous way: a short Facebook post from a pastor and former student that, though simple and quiet, grabbed your chest and wouldn't let go:

I found out this morning a colleague from my doctoral studies died by suicide. I am not looking for any sympathy, but if I seem lost in thought if you see me, please let me be.

In recent years, a string of high-profile ministry suicides have more of us asking the question, Why does it seem that so many church pastors are struggling with their mental health?

Maybe it's always been there, and it's just harder to hide today, or conversely, it's easier to talk about. But I don't see either as true. Especially in this post-Christian and post-denominational time, the pastor as prophet, priest, administrator, counselor, innovator, HR specialist, budget fixer, building fixer, evangelist, millennial-generation whisperer, and anxiety soother, accessible 24/7 by phone or text, is a daunting task. The stress is enormous. The existence is lonely. It's a heavy load.

I've begun reading Andrew Root's new book, "The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God." Chapter one begins this way:

"I'm not sure what I'm doing," he said. I'd never met him before, but I'd talked with hundreds of him (and hers) after speaking at pastors' conferences. The air of fragile confidence was familiar, this sense of being lost in the house you grew up in. I've been a pastor for fifteen years, and most days I have no idea what I am doing," he continued.

The chapter is titled, "a historical map of the pastor in our secular age," and it's a remarkable look behind the curtain at pastoral identity and practice. Remarkable, and more than a little bit unsettling. I'm working my way through the book now—though not at the pace I would like or anticipated. Because, as a pastor (even in this more administrative role), the time I thought I'd have for this reading has quickly been buried by email and meetings and other needs: all important, all necessary, and, if I let it, all consuming.

I understand we are where we are in part as a symptom of the culture around us. Everyone is busy today; we're all overwhelmed. I don't have an answer for that. But I am looking, and we are looking as a Presbytery—looking for ways in which the Presbytery can support its members in their diverse ministries, whether congregational or in some form of service outside the congregation. To be the life-giving church of the living God to those whom we have called to lead us.

This day, I pray all of our church leaders might experience a hope made wise by experience and undaunted by disappointment. And I invite all of you not simply to join in that prayer, but also to look for ways in which you might intentionally encourage those whom you know who are investing their lives—and, tragically at times, their health—for the sake of the church and the gospel.

There were 261 teaching elder members of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area as of December 31 of last year (the last formal count). I am grateful for them, and for all they bring to our churches and communities.