



Loneliness in Ministry

Below: Find a link to the UCLA Loneliness Survey

Jeremy's Story

by [Mark Sundby, MDiv, PhD, LP](#)

Jeremy, who has almost 40 years in congregational ministry, recently completed our online loneliness survey, which we're inviting clergy to complete as part of our research into loneliness in ministry. After submitting it, he reached out almost immediately to me. Although the survey touched on aspects of loneliness in clergy, he wanted me to know that the experience is much more nuanced than implied by the questions, and that it has assumed different shapes across the course of a career.

In the beginning, as a younger pastor, loneliness felt like being an outsider due to age, as Jeremy was in his 20s serving a congregation of people mostly in their 60s and above. He also was single in a small town, with little hope of finding a life partner in the area, and geographically isolated from family and friends. The pangs of loneliness were acute. It felt like how many of us think of loneliness – sitting all alone on a Saturday in a state of sadness and longing.

From mid-career onward, though, the shape of loneliness changed. After marriage and children, he no longer felt loneliness in ministry as geographic isolation as much as

social isolation. On one hand, he could ground it in his call to ministry, as being set apart as a spiritual leader to serve the people of God; on the other hand, the emotional and spiritual burdens of the people in his congregation weighed heavily on him. Jeremy devoted himself entirely to their wellbeing, and he took on their struggles as his own. As people confided in him, he learned to compartmentalize relationships and emotions. By turns, individuals told him their deepest concerns to him in private, and then Jeremy and his congregants would go about their routines in the congregation and the wider community as if nothing had occurred, never letting on about an extramarital affair, a pending diagnosis, a fear of bankruptcy, and the like. The cumulative impact on Jeremy was exhausting.

He is now approaching retirement. Loneliness is still with him and has taken on yet another shape. The church and denomination he has loved for decades is in decline. From his vantage point as a pastor, looking over the landscape of ministry, he can see it happening across the culture. The rise of the “spiritual but not religious” is

nudging aside the institutional church. His congregation, though, doesn't see it. Once again, he experiences loneliness, as many project the responsibility for the decline on to him – if only he would preach more dynamic sermons, relate better to the youth, visit the

older adults more frequently, and so on. Although it's a different kind of loneliness, it feels familiar, too, as it arises from the experience of being set apart as a spiritual leader.

In our work with clergy, whether in workshops or one-on-one consultations, we often hear stories of loneliness and isolation. In fact, one significant clergy survey found that 1 out of 3 clergy acknowledge feeling lonely and isolated (Clergy Wellbeing Survey, UMC, 2017)[1](#). Jeremy's story helps provide context and depth to these stories and statistics.

The Health Toll of Loneliness

Social scientists are only now beginning to understand the full cost of loneliness. In the general population, for instance, loneliness is a stronger predictor of premature death than air pollution, obesity, or alcohol abuse. Depending on the study, people who are lonely have about a 1.5 to 3 times greater chance of dying in the next five years than those who are less lonely. We further know that loneliness correlates with significant increases in sleep disturbances, headaches, backaches, blood pressure, poor appetite, and depression. Because loneliness heightens the cortisol levels, a stress hormone, it also weakens our immune system, which makes us more susceptible to illnesses. (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2012[2](#); Cacioppo, Hawkley, and Berston, 2003[3](#); Masi, Chen, Hawkley, and Cacioppo, 2011[4](#)).

LeaderWise Research

At LeaderWise, we hear anecdotally about loneliness every day in our meetings with clergy, and we want to learn more about the prevalence and impact of loneliness in a systematic way. By having accurate information, we can document the experience of loneliness among clergy to advocate for resources and support, as well as to focus our LeaderWise services to better serve clergy and their loved ones.

Can you help? We'd appreciate if you'd take 5 to 10 minutes to complete the [UCLA Loneliness Survey](#). Your responses will be kept confidential. And, if you'd like to share your story of loneliness as a spiritual leader, I'd love to hear from you. [Contact me](#), and let's talk.

References

- 1 Clergy Well-Being Survey (2017). WesPath Benefits and Investments, United Methodist Church.
- 2 Cacioppo, J. and Cacioppo, S. (2012). The Phenotype of Loneliness. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 9(4), 446 - 452.
- 3 Cacioppo, J., Hawkley, L., Berston (2003). The Anatomy of Loneliness. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 12(3), 71 - 74.
- 4 Masi, C., Chen, H., Hawkley, L. Cacioppo, J. (2011). A Meta-Analysis of Interventions to Reduce Loneliness. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15(3), 219 - 266.