

Pastors, You Are the Immune System of Our Movement¹

For the sake of our congregations—and the EFCA—it's time to flee isolation and live in community with other pastors.

Scott Barber – April 09, 2026

I can handle this.

Almost instinctively, this thought inserted itself into the fray of my stress, struggle and shame. Yet again, I found myself on the hamster wheel of ministry—saying yes to too many “good” opportunities, controlled by the tyranny of the urgent—despite just recently telling a mentee of mine: “Remember, the *good* is the enemy of the *best*.”

It wasn't just saying yes too often—I was responding to texts and phone calls on my days off, during meals and time with my family. In her frustration, my wife reminded me, “Remember our rule of no phones at the table? This is *our* time together. Can't it wait?” I had given away my margin. My desire to be a good shepherd had become an idol. Once again, I was sacrificing my family on the altar of my need to be needed.

As decision- and compassion-fatigue mounted, I could feel the overload impacting my judgment. Stress manifested in my body through growing fatigue, anxiety and tension. I constantly looked ahead to my next day off. I was redlining—again.

I've been here before, I told myself. I can handle this.

In the busyness, I'd replaced my daily soul-feeding practices of devotion, abiding and prayer with trying to feed myself through productivity, sermon writing and small group prep. To survive, I compartmentalized. For now, I was a shepherd to my congregation, not one of God's sheep.

In my shame, Satan darkened my vision to a myopic focus on my sin and self-reliant solutions: “You are alone,” he whispered. “But just keep working. It will go away eventually.”

As the stress accumulated, the desire for escape increased, resurfacing old temptations in my body and thought life. Initially, my willpower provided enough strength to ignore them, but the temptations persisted. *I can't have these thoughts. I'm a pastor!* The warning sirens in my body finally began to break through the deafened ears of my soul.

¹ <https://blogs.efca.org/posts/pastors-you-are-the-immune-system-of-our-movement>

I was wrong. I can't handle this. I know better. I'm burning out—again. But where can I go?

Satan seized the opportunity. Taking my own voice, he whispered in my ear, “You’re alone. Others don’t understand you or the load you carry as a pastor. It’s not right to burden them anyways—you’re their *pastor*. You’re supposed to help them. And you certainly can’t trust how they’ll respond to your struggles. What would they think if they knew the *real* you?”

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Prone to isolate, Lord, I feel it

“As a pastor, who can I be fully open and transparent with? Who can I share my heart with, without filtering based on my fears of how they’ll respond?”

In my short time serving as the [EFCA’s director of pastoral theology and care](#), I’ve heard these questions several times. I asked them many times myself—internally and externally—while serving as an EFCA pastor for almost 14 years. The stress piles up; the fear gets louder and the tension builds to a breaking point—without any realistic options for relational relief.

If I share with my elders, they might overreact and take away my job. If I share with my congregation, I risk over-burdening them and losing an important boundary of confidentiality. I don’t know how my district leaders will respond either.

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As pastors, we often feel there’s no place for us to be truly honest. It’s easy to hide in the crowd. It’s risky to open our hearts to others. It’s easy to avoid relational depth and vulnerability for the sake of “more important things,” like theology or ministry strategy, war stories or successes. Shame also plays a significant role: *If others knew my struggles, they’d think less of me. They’d think I’m unfit to be a pastor.*

Ultimately, our pride and shame prevent us from prioritizing our own care and accountability. In this fog, we tend to believe a combination of three lies:

1. We minimize the power of sin in us and spiritual warfare around us.
2. We minimize the impact of our role as pastors.
3. We minimize the necessity of community.

In Hebrews 3, the author cautions the redeemed people of God against the deceitfulness of sin:

“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” (Heb 3:12–14)

Like the Israelites, we are all susceptible to the seductive strength of sin. As pastors, these currents pull us away from humble self-awareness and dependency on God, toward the deceitfulness of self-reliance (“I got this”) and compartmentalization (“I’m the exception”). Our hearts resonate with the words of the beloved hymn: *Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it.*

Pastors also possess unique influence—for good or ill—which creates a bigger target for the Enemy. This is why Paul instructs Timothy (and all pastors) to “watch your life and your doctrine closely, for by them you will save both yourselves and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16). Peter goes further, instructing shepherds to “not be overbearing, but lead by example” (1 Pet 5:3).

For many of us, this combination of underestimating sin and feeling pressure to perform provides the perfect breeding ground for isolation. And sin in isolation is a recipe for disaster. The [recent announcement](#) of Philip Yancey’s eight-year affair is evidence of this—and a warning to us all. In [his response](#) to Yancey’s confession, Ed Stetzer writes:

"[W]hen we underestimate our capacity for sin and our moral vulnerability we're in dangerous territory. We must develop self-awareness about our own personal temptations—and the capacity we have to sin. Secret sins often grow worse and cause greater harm... We can't deal with these things alone. We need community. Denying or hiding attractions or struggles only makes them stronger."

As pastors, we are prone to wander—prone to isolate—and yet, the power of our position elevates the importance of leading by example. What’s the answer?

We need each other.

A light in the darkness

As I fought to quiet the voice of Satan whispering to me, my phone buzzed. It was a reminder for my monthly EFCA pastor gathering, the light in the darkness I desperately needed. Through the text, I sensed the Spirit of God reminding me: “You are not alone. Come to my throne of grace through these brothers, like you have before.”

A few days later, I met with a handful of other EFCA pastors in the side room of a small southwest Minnesota coffee shop. I shared about my recent stress and confessed my struggle to hold healthy boundaries. As I shared to these brothers who understood my pastoral calling and burdens, I felt the oppressive weight of shame lifting off my shoulders. In humility, I asked them to check in with me, outside of our gathering, to hold me accountable. During the next few weeks, many of them texted and called.

This instance of confession and corresponding care was not isolated. For 14 years, these fellow EFCA pastors and I created an environment of accountability and vulnerability. Prone to self-reliance, sin and burnout, our monthly gathering became the crucible for “watching our life and doctrine closely” (1 Tim 4:16).

Pastors are uniquely positioned to provide the first line of care for each other because 1) they have no authority over each other and 2) they understand the burden and experience of pastoral ministry.

“I can honestly say that I would not have persevered in ministry without these other brothers by my side.” said Don LeClere, recently retired pastor of [Marshall Efree Church](#) (EFCA) about our pastor cluster. “To have men beside me to shoulder tragedy, conflict, shame and encouragement is indescribable. To do the same for them is the greatest joy.”

In [Resilient Ministry](#), the authors share interviews with pastors that explore the key ingredients for producing resilience in pastors. One of their main findings: pastors need “confidants”:

“Accountable relationships are necessary for spiritual growth. Pastors need brothers who are confidants: persons who can provide you with a place where you can say everything that’s in your heart, everything that’s on your mind, without being predigested or well packaged” (pg. 44).

In Article 8 of the [EFCA Statement of Faith](#), it says, “With God’s Word, the Spirit’s power, and fervent prayer in Christ’s name, we are to combat the spiritual forces of evil.” In [Evangelical Convictions](#), the authors note the importance of the pronoun (“we”):

“It is important to notice the ‘we’ in our Statement—‘we are to combat spiritual forces of evil.’ We need each other in this spiritual battle, for who wants to be alone behind enemy lines? And in prayer we can supply protective cover for others who may be in the line of fire themselves...We must not fight alone, and we must strengthen others through our prayer.” (pg. 180-181)

In [The Care of Souls](#), Harold Senkbeil further specifies that such confidants should include other pastors:

“Find a pastor in whom you can confide. Confess your sins. Pour out your regret, shame and remorse. That pastor will be your soul’s physician to forgive your sins, to heal your wounds, and help you live in freedom” (pg. 208).

Pastors are uniquely positioned to provide the first line of care for each other—because 1) they have no authority over each other and 2) they understand the burden and experience of pastoral ministry. This doesn’t mean we can’t or shouldn’t have other sources for confidants—we need multiple layers of trusted relationships—but the need for community with other pastors cannot be replaced.

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Within that community, God commands us to “exhort one another.” Exhorting isn’t just providing care, encouragement or accountability; it implies a humble openness to receive the presence of Christ, as well as the finished and victorious work of Christ, through each other. This involves uncovering our sin and temptations, wounds and stresses, idols and weaknesses to combat Satan’s attempts to distort who God is and who we are. I call this “gospel community.”

To the joy of my southwestern Minnesota gospel community, the Spirit of God worked through our vulnerability, accountability and care over the years to produce healing, growth and gospel faithfulness in each of us. Even more, God used the health of our group to ripple out into our respective congregations and our district.

The impact of this group on the life of the individual pastors might not surprise us. But I wonder, do we realize the effect groups like this could have on our churches, even our movement as a whole?

The EFCA’s immune system

Pastors, you are the immune system of our movement. Just as our immune system works together to protect us from germs and disease, the interconnectedness and interdependence of pastors facilitate the health and protection of the entire body of Christ. When pastors gather in vulnerability and honesty—to heal from our sin and individual wounds—the Holy Spirit extends that redemptive (healing) work of Christ to our local congregations and the broader movement of the gospel.

And it goes beyond sanctification. Pastors also need each other for theological fidelity and contextual application—to protect us against theological drift, ministry malpractice and operating in siloes. We watch not only our life but also our doctrine through interdependence with other local pastors. In an [article](#) for The Gospel Coalition responding to theological issues facing churches today, cultural apologist Daniel Strange writes:

“One of the great challenges is how to minister the never-changing gospel of Christ in contexts where both the cultural diversity and pace of change leaves us dizzy

and breathless as we try to keep up...If complex problem solving requires a complex strategy, we need the collected wisdom of the church. Your perspective along with mine will give us all better answers. However much this puts us out of our cultural comfort zones we will have to collaborate and be working on a theology of collaboration.”

We, as EFCA pastors, are better together. “There’s something special about doctrinal alignment that engenders trust,” said Trent Thompson, pastor of [West Shore Free Church](#) (EFCA) in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, and leader of an EFCA pastor cohort. “We share similar hearts and convictions that catalyze our love for Jesus.”

Put another way, gospel community helps our movement stay [biblical and missional, united and free](#).

More than 350 years ago, God used Philipp Jakob Spener—noted in [Evangelical Heritage](#) as a “historical hero of the EFCA”—to reform pastoral ministry. As articulated in his book, [Pia Desideria](#) (Pious Desires), Spener believed God uniquely positioned pastors in the body of Christ to have systemic influence and impact. Spener recalls from history: “How common was it for God, whenever he planned a reformation, to begin it with [pastors]” (*Pia Desideria*, pg. 45).

To this end, Spener proposed a then-revolutionary idea of gathering in small groups for prayer and accountability around God’s Word, which he called *collegia pietatis*. Spener challenged his fellow pastors to lead by example in this area.

“How can I preach to my congregation to be loving, unified and in community with each other and I not pursue radically loving, biblical community with my fellow pastors?” said Dawson Lange, pastor of [Mountainside Community Church](#) (EFCA) in Reno, Nevada.

Don’t measure your spiritual health by your feelings or absence of problems—you need community with other pastors regularly. Our efficacy as ministers of the gospel comes from being active recipients of the gospel through others. We are sheep before we are shepherds. Like Paul, we should say, “Follow me as I follow Christ.”

Next steps

Here’s the sad truth: many pastors are not in gospel community. We hear the stories of moral failure and burnout from isolated pastors. We know the importance of community. We preach it from the pulpit and build pathways for our flocks to “do life” with each other. And still, we often isolate.

Personally, I know the excuses. I’ve thought or said “I’m too busy” more than I’d like to admit. I’ve given into the tyranny of the urgent, prioritizing immediate needs over what was necessary for wise and sustainable ministry. I’ve

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given into the myth of self-sufficiency in times of “success.” But none of that replaced the need for trusting relationships.

Fellow pastors, are you in gospel community? Or are you fighting alone and hiding in the crowd? You are too important to do ministry in isolation. As the immune system of the EFCA, how will you respond to the unique and powerful influence God has given pastors to spread the healing and protection of the gospel to the body of Christ?

Let these suggestions serve as possible routes toward gospel community:

- Talk with your [EFCA district superintendent](#) (DS) about available pastor gatherings.
- If there isn't a pastor gathering in your area, talk with your DS and consider starting one. We have a resource ([EFCA Pastor Small Groups Bundle](#)) to help get you started.
- If you and fellow pastors are too far apart to drive, connect through video call. In-person is certainly ideal, but online is better than not connecting at all.
- Avoid excuses by planning in advance and protecting these gatherings in your schedule.
- If you're already in a pastor small group: Does your group need help going deeper? Consider using the [EFCA Pastor Small Group Bundle](#).
- Do you know of EFCA pastors who are isolated? Invite them to your group.
- If you already experience the joy and blessing of vulnerable, grace-compelled accountability and close friendship with other pastors, I would love to hear about it! [Send me an email](#).

For the sake of your health, the health of your home, your own growth in Christ, the effectiveness of your ministry, the health of your congregation, our movement and God's glory—pastors, tenaciously pursue Christ together in community.



Scott Barber -- Director of Pastoral Theology and Care

Scott Barber is the director of pastoral theology and care for the EFCA. Domains of his role include pastoral resilience and care, recovery churches, pastor placement and chaplain ministries. Scott also serves on the EFCA Board of Ministerial Standing. He, his wife, Jane, and their two boys live in Cottage Grove, Minnesota. Prior to being called to national ministry, Scott served as a licensed professional counselor (LPC) in Nebraska for three years and then served as lead pastor at Grace Community Church (EFCA) in

Worthington, Minnesota, for nearly 14 years. Scott is an active guy who enjoys playing sports, being in the outdoors with his family, roasting coffee, making salsa and hot sauce, smoking tasty meats and watching college football (Go Big Red and Roll Tide).