

SOMETHING NEEDS TO CHANGE

The kingdom-minded pastor understands that no church or pastor can do the work of the Great commission alone. A kingdom-minded pastor is not as concerned with territorial control as he is with saturating all places with the gospel. The kingdom-minded pastor values partnership with others. I believe that, by discussing partnerships between pastors, we are diving into a subject that is close to Christ's heart. Are you ready to make the shift, to embrace a new paradigm in ministry? Let us face the necessary changes to become healthier local pastors, leading healthier local churches. First, we need to admit that there are problems.

Problem #1: The Lonely Pastor

There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away. (1 Kings 19:9-10)

If we're going to become more kingdom-minded in our pastoral ministry, we will need to acknowledge that there are things that need to change. Change is hard. Knowing that there are problems and never addressing them is destructive. In this chapter, I want to help you identify a few key problems that tend to get in the way. Let's start with isolation and loneliness. Everyone faces times of loneliness. It could come from neglect, abandonment, or the feelings that come from being ridiculed by others. This can push a person into isolation. Loneliness can also be self-afflicted. Some personalities have a harder time forming healthy relationships. Introverted people need to work hard to come out of their shell, to be exposed to the life-giving effects of fellowship and friendship. All of this is true for every human on earth, including pastors.

Pastoral ministry is a heavy burden to bear. Shepherds have the job of leading, loving, nurturing, and disciplining a flock of sheep for the sake of their spiritual good and safety. This can be lonely work for a

variety of reasons. Church members treat their leaders as though they have no needs, even if such treatment is unintentional. It's true that pastors should be competent in self-leadership, but this does not mean that pastors have no weaknesses or needs of their own.

A pastor can experience loneliness in his own denomination or network of churches. Looking back, the family of churches that I was involved with as a new Christian has provided me with a good comparison. Before I was ever a pastor, I witnessed church planters go out from the mother church. Over time, the pastors and families who started those new churches began to experience loneliness. They were in an unfamiliar place. They lacked the committed community they once enjoyed. They were on their way to building a new church family, but it would take time. The need for connection, friendship, encouragement, and partnership does not go away.

Consider Paul's words to the church that he planted in Philippi:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

(Phil. 1:4-6)

The Philippian church was prayed for, loved, and remembered by Paul. They were not neglected or left

to fend for themselves, as I fear many pastors and new church plants are today.

Problem #2: Stagnant Mission and Ministry

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot.
Would that you were either cold or hot! (Rev. 3:15)

Another problem I often see is when a local church has grown stagnant in their mission. These are usually churches with a leader who knows that important changes are necessary, but the leadership muscle is too weak to make those changes. This is often the case in a church with a single pastor. He has been called to revitalize the church. The deacon board is calling the shots, but their decisions are not motivated by a biblical mission. They have little respect for the pastoral office because tradition has convinced them that they are in charge. They believe the pastor must bend to their wishes. This scenario is common, and churches are dying as a result. It could also be that the existing members have been scared by the actions of previous pastors, so they offer the new hire little trust. This is a stagnant church. It cannot move forward with a kingdom vision because the leadership structure is unhealthy. You might be that lone pastor who feels like you are fighting against your deacons and members, rather than working together in harmony. Many are walking in similar shoes. This can change, but you will need patience and boldness. Hold on.

Sometimes the church is stuck because the pastor is stuck in his pride and refusing to heed the signs of decline. He needs to lead the church in a direction that fits a thoroughly biblical model, but he won't. There's no intentional discipleship, no fellowship happening beyond Sunday morning, the sermons are always topical (they should never be always topical) and rarely expositional, the youth are gone, and leaders are not being developed for future eldership. This is what I see as I look around my region.

I live in a small community in Maine with a population of around nine thousand people. Even in this small community I see stagnancy. Maine was once a land of rich gospel fruitfulness. I'll be dedicating the final chapter of this book to introducing you to two inspiring figures in church history, one of which made an impact on my own state. Many of the churches that pepper this land are no longer filled with healthy Christians or being led by qualified pastors. The Great Commission of Christ is omitted. The numbers are clear. Churches are declining and church doors are closing. We need to shock the system back to life with a good dose of kingdom-mindedness. Look at the words of Christ to a small local church in ancient day Asia Minor, perhaps a lot like yours: "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God" (Rev. 3:1-2). The reputation of being alive is not good enough. Wake up, my brothers!

Problem #3: Heavy Burdens

I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me ... Then the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you" (Num. 11:14, 16).

Moses's burden was too heavy to carry alone. Kingdom-minded pastors bear a weight that seminary training can hardly prepare them for. We will all find ourselves in situations like Moses from time to time when we are at the end of our own strength and need others to stand with us. We all need the wisdom found in faithful friends and counselors who are walking in similar shoes and bearing similar burdens.

Look around you. I'm sure you know a pastor who is carrying a heavy load. His marriage is struggling because the ministry is taking up all his time, and he struggles to say no. He and his wife have not been on a date without kids for five years. You know of the pastor I'm speaking about. He hears complaints from members who don't like his preaching. He doesn't have an elder team to support and encourage him. He's the brother whose family decided to step into the difficult world of adoption, and now they are church planting with no support system. The church is falling apart due to disunity and infighting. Paul, likewise,

carried a heavy-burden, as described in his second letter to the Corinthian church:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? (2 Cor. 11:24-29)

Paul carried a heavy burden. He thought about the churches he had planted over the years. He loved them. He cared about their leaders and the congregations. He wanted them to grow in Christ and to multiply. Paul's list teaches us that we are not alone in the burdens we bear. Paul's burdens outnumber mine ten to one, and I hear no complaining from him. But we also learn from this that Paul had a vested interest in the life of more than just one church. He cared for them all. That's kingdom-mindedness. With the inevitability of burdens, you need as many as you can get standing by your side. You need your wife, children, church members, and fellow elders. You need the unique and

fresh perspective that pastors of other local churches can bring you. There are people around you (even if you haven't found them yet) with wisdom to share.

Again, the life and ministry of Moses gives us a good example. In Exodus 18, Moses had already led the Israelites out of Egypt as God freed them from slavery. After crossing the Red Sea and wandering in the wilderness, the people are in need of council. Day and night, they come to Moses to receive his wisdom. Yet his father-in-law, Jethro, recognizes that this is too much a burden for one man to carry himself. Receiving Jethro's instruction, Moses gathers leaders together from each tribe, placing them in leadership over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, that the burden might be shouldered together. The burden of leadership is one which ought to be shared and carried together, arm in arm, with fellow brothers in Christ, lest we overburden ourselves.

Problem #4: Lacking Intentionality

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 10:24-25).

This New Testament text is commonly used to encourage fellowship and attendance for believers in the local church, but the principle applies to pastor-to-pastor relationships as well. One of the purposes

of this book is to convince you that meeting with an intentional group of likeminded pastors can positively affect your life and ministry. One might reply, “Yes, but I’ve been to pastors’ meetings before, and it was a waste of my time.” We don’t need more meetings so that pastors can come together and complain. I attended a few in 2020 during that dreaded COVID year. Pastors needed encouragement at that time more than ever. To my disappointment, the conversations never seemed to get past, “How many people are wearing masks in your church?” or “How is your online attendance?” Those questions are not innately wrong. When addressed with a kingdom mindset, they can be used for equipping and encouragement. Nevertheless, we need our meetings to be intentional for the kingdom and for the encouragement of a pastor’s soul. We need meetings that allow pastors to engage in matters of deep soul-searching, biblical discussion, and meaningful prayer. We need to be able to share the unique struggles we face as shepherds, pointing each other to the hope and faithfulness of our great Shepherd.

It’s Not All Bad News

Before we move on, let’s rejoice in the fact that there are pastors and churches who are doing well. I hope that you are one of those. I hope that, as you read this, you are not on the brink of burnout. I hope that you can say that the Lord is good to you, and that ministry, though always challenging, is a blessing in your life because Jesus is good. Even though pastoral

ministry is guaranteed to be trying, I pray that you are experiencing the fullness of God's joy. I believe that right now in most communities there are men who are committed to the Scriptures. There are men who will teach and apply a biblical vision even when it costs them greatly. There are men who are committed to shepherding their flocks. There are men who are standing on biblical truth and committed to developing leaders, planting new churches, and fulfilling the Great Commission. These are the kind of men you need fellowship with. If you do find yourself in a good and healthy place right now, let me challenge you to step up and encourage another pastor today.

To the lonely pastor reading this book, the Lord loves you. You are never truly alone. Remember to preach this to yourself daily. Do not allow your weary soul to suffer in silence any longer. Cling to Jesus and the help He has graciously supplied for you in the truth of the gospel. Remember that His Spirit indwells you. His Word is sufficient for you. You are His adopted son, and He calls you friend. Don't wallow in self-pity. Ask the Spirit of God to search your heart. There may be sin there that you need to repent from. Sins of self-sufficiency, distrust, unforgiveness, and bitterness can easily cloud one's ability to see the will of God. It may be the need to forgive those who have neglected, slandered, or abandoned you, leading you to isolate yourself. Begin to build your confidence again in God's vision for the church.

Whatever your unique circumstance, I rejoice over you. I want you to be the pioneers for kingdom-

mind partnership in your church, city, or region. Fixing the problems identified in this chapter begins with having the right vision. Stagnant churches and lonely pastors, whose arms are weak from carrying the burden alone, will continue to be a problem until a vision for kingdom-mindedness takes center stage.

Questions for Further Consideration:

1. Several problems were mentioned in this chapter. Which one can you most identify with?
2. What could you do to encourage a pastor who is discouraged and tired, and help to strengthen him?
3. As you consider your current mission field, what factors do you believe are hindering the fruitfulness of local churches, including your own?

It's really helpful for me to know that I'm connected to a greater work of the Lord outside of our local church. I never want to be a pastor on an island by myself and this group is great in helping me see other men carrying and proclaiming the same gospel. So, the primary benefit for me is on a pastoral level. Plus the fellowship is really refreshing to my soul, which does spill into all other areas of my life. I honestly can't think of any way this could be better.

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