

This issue's Focus is on
Grief While in Ministry

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CARED FOR WHILE LEADING

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You keep track of all my sorrows.
You have collected all my tears in
your bottle. You have recorded each
one in your book.

Psalm 56:8



No one ever told me
that grief felt so like fear.

C.S. Lewis



HOW PASTORS NAVIGATE PERSONAL GRIEF

by Pastor Vicki Podjasek

Grief is no stranger to those in ministry. Pastors routinely walk alongside others through life's deepest valleys—loss, heartbreak, and tragedy. Collectively, GLC pastors have stood beside countless individuals and families as they mourned their loved ones, endured separations, and faced devastating events. We have trained for this through seminary, counseling courses, workshops, and seminars. Yet, nothing in my pastoral experience truly prepared me for the emotional weight of losing my husband last April. That experience revealed a sobering truth: while pastors are trained to support and comfort others, we are often unprepared to process our own grief and swallow our own medicine.

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We need to ask ourselves some important questions: How can spiritual leaders prepare for seasons of personal sorrow? And, who supports the pastor when they are the one grieving?

Below are five meaningful ways pastors can tend to their own hearts—and each other’s—during seasons of loss. To help you remember, I’ve arranged them into the acronym SHALT, as in “thou SHALT be as attentive to your own heart as you are to your congregants.”

These practices offer guidance for navigating the deep waters of grief while continuing to serve. The SHALT framework is a reminder that tending to your own soul is not selfish—it’s sacred. Your ministry will only be as healthy as you are, and you deserve just as much care and compassion as those you shepherd. In fact, you may need it even more, because you cannot pour into others what you haven’t received yourself.



Support – seek professional support as needed

Grief is universal, and pastors are not exempt. Yet, when tragedy strikes our personal lives, we often suppress our emotions and continue ministering—sometimes without missing a beat. By embracing vulnerability, seeking support, and allowing space to heal, spiritual leaders can navigate loss with grace and authenticity. In fact, pastors who receive the support they need are better positioned, in the long run, to care for their families and lead their congregations well.

Sadly, professional counseling still carries a stigma—especially for those in leadership. But seeking Christian counseling is a sign of strength, not weakness. It doesn’t replace leaning on Jesus; it enhances it. Pastors spend countless hours counseling others, so why hesitate to receive it ourselves? A trusted counselor offers a safe place to process emotions, gain clarity, and be fully transparent. Don’t let fear, pride, or busyness keep you from seeking the support you may need.



Human – remember you are human

Jesus was fully human and fully divine. He felt deep emotion when he experienced loss, he stepped away from ministry when needed, and he wept. Even his divinity didn’t shelter him from the searing pain of grief. And so it is for us; our humanity must be recognized and tended to.

Letting go of the expectation to “stay strong” or “lead through the pain” is crucial. Give yourself permission to feel deeply, mourn openly, express your needs, and step away from ministry to make space for healing. True healing begins when we embrace our humanity—not our roles or titles.



Away – time away is necessary

Ministry is relentless, and many pastors feel guilty about taking time off. Some even believe no one can step into their role. But grief demands attention. If we don’t tend to it, it festers—buried, unhealed, and untamable. Eventually, it resurfaces, often disguised as anger, bitterness, irritability, depression, insomnia, lack of focus, self-doubt, or even a desire to leave ministry altogether.

Stepping away from pastoral responsibilities to be alone with God, process loss, and spend time with loved ones isn’t just acceptable—it’s essential. Let others carry the load for a while. Your well-being matters, and your congregation and board will understand.



Liability – pride goes before the fall

Pastors often struggle to build authentic relationships outside of their church, and when trauma or loss strikes, that isolation only deepens the pain. Furthermore, death isn't the only form of grief we face. Many losses—and the ways we cope with them—are deeply personal and best processed outside of congregational or even family relationships.



Take a moment to reflect: Do you have relationships where you can be 100% honest about your grief, pain, struggles, and default coping mechanisms?

Let's revisit the second point: You are human. Like everyone else, you likely have some unhealthy defaults you use to numb the pain—procrastination, workaholism, binge-watching, gaming, overeating, alcohol, unhealthy internet use, and more. These behaviors are not problems in and of themselves; it's how and when we use them that matters. Pastors are not immune to these coping strategies, and when we lack relationships where we can be entirely honest and transparent, we become far more vulnerable to burnout—or worse.

You need at least one safe person whose only role is to be your friend. That means someone outside your church and family—someone with no stake in your ministry, just in your well-being.

We've all seen pastors fall. And yet most of us think, "That could never be me." So did they. Don't wait for a crisis to find a safe place to land. By then, it may be too late. Build your support system now—intentionally, consistently, and with care—so it's there when you need it most.



Tears – emotions that are not processed are stored

One of the most profound verses in Scripture is simply, "Jesus wept." When faced with the death of his friend Lazarus, Jesus cried—even though he was about to raise him from the dead. Did he cry out of compassion for Mary and Martha? For his own loss? For the sorrow that sin and death had brought into his Father's perfect creation? I believe it was all of the above.

This moment assures us that tears are not a sign of weakness—they are a natural, sacred expression of grief, and an essential part of healing. Let yourself feel the sadness. Let the tears come. If Jesus could weep, so can we.

Scripture is filled with examples of faithful people who mourned: King David wept over Absalom's death, Ruth and Orpah cried as they parted ways, Hannah wept in anguish over her inability to conceive. These are all examples of great loss, and these stories remind us that grief is deeply human and wholly normal. Ecclesiastes 3 tells us there is "a time to weep and a time to mourn," yet Psalm 30 promises that "weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."

Pastors, when you face grief and loss, give yourself these gifts: permission to be human, space and time to mourn, safe support where you can be vulnerable and transparent, the cleansing release of tears—and above all, cling tightly to the hope of what lies ahead.



Grief

The work of adjusting to a loss and accepting a new reality.

Where are you?!

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalm 34:18

Significant Losses We Experience

- **Death of a loved one** (sudden - prolonged - suicide)
- **Health** (disease, faculties, functionality)
- **Divorce** (spouse + friendships, routines, purpose, finances & more)
- **Youth/Aging** (identity, independence, mobility, circle of friends & family)
- **Happiness**
- **Respect** (from others or self)
- **Empty Nest**
- **Dreams/hopes/plans**
- **Freedom** (driving, nursing home, job change, physical limitations)
- **Jobs** (identity, respect, control, joy, friendships, family provider)
- **Stuff/money**
- **Institutions** (religious, educational, social - sense of belonging, routines)
- **Trust**
- Other

Which one is most significant?

The one that **is impacting** you the most or the one that **has impacted** you the most.

Responding Well to Grief

- LISTEN - no words - "be" with them.
- Meet basic needs (food, water, sleep)
- "I'll sit with her/him while you nap and wake you if anything changes."
- "Where are the kids? I'll pick them up for you."
- "Is anyone watching the dog? I will go take care of him."
- "Would you like me to drive you?"
- "Would you like me to stay with you tonight?"
- When they ask for help, take it seriously. It's hard to ask for help.
- No unkept promises or plans with someone who is grieving (except in an emergency).
- Be understanding if they cannot keep promises or plans.
- Refrain from clichés that make you feel better because you don't know what else to say. It's better to say, "I'm at a loss for words, but I'm here for you."

Spiritual Exercise

Take a moment to acknowledge the losses you've experienced. Begin with the earliest and move toward the present, spending no more than 1 minute on the first item and 30 seconds on each thereafter.

- Losses over your lifetime.
- Losses in the last year.
- Losses in the last month.
- Losses in the last week.
- Losses today.

After completing your list, pause in the stillness of God's presence. Invite Him to gently reveal what still needs healing.

Keep your list close. We'll return to it in the next newsletter.

Dear Pastors,

In the coming months, I look forward to calling each of you to check in. I would love to hear your thoughts on "Cared for While Leading," as well as gather any prayer requests or support needs you may have. However, please don't feel you need to wait for my call; you can reach out to me anytime using the phone number or email listed below. Thank you for the incredible work you do. Remember, you're not alone on this ministry journey. ~ Pastor Vicki



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