

Mental Illness and Ministers: Imagining a Community Where They can be Vulnerable

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**Abstract:**

The stigmatization of mental health within the Church has created a perplexing dichotomy where church congregants shun those who are in need, a problem that has long vexed Christians. Even more complex is the problem of psychological health for ministers, who are often forgotten about having their own difficulties simply due to the title they bear. Mental health issues for ministers in America have continually risen in recent years, sadly with an increase in the number of suicides committed by Church leaders. The lack of support and availability for ministers to speak about their struggles is becoming a national issue that needs more awareness and conversation regarding the topic. I will look into the reasons why Church tradition prevents ministers from being vulnerable in discussing their mental health and why there is such little discussion about this important and prevalent issue. I will also look into ways that church congregants and officials within the Church community can create a better community for their leaders. Additionally, I will try to show how the use of imagination can break the Church tradition that prevents vulnerability of ministers' struggles and how instead it can be used to create a new community and support for the emotionally taxing role that they occupy.

**Keywords:** Psychological Health, Church Leaders, Suicide, Mental Health Stigma, Community

Jarrid Wilson was 30. He was an up-and coming pastor and the associate minister at Harvest Christian Fellowship, a megachurch in California. He had two little boys, both under the age of five. He had a beautiful wife, to whom he had been married for six years. Despite a seemingly successful and happy life, he died from suicide on September 9, 2019, just one day before World Suicide Prevention Day. That morning, he had spoken at a funeral service for a woman who had taken her own life. (Stone, 2019). I remember scrolling through Facebook that evening when I came across this news. What seemed like a normal, relaxing evening has become one that I cannot stop thinking about. Why? Because Jarrid's story is not uncommon. Minister Robert McKeehan was 42. Pastor Bill Lenz was 60. Reverend Teddy Parker Jr. was 42. Pastor Larry DeLong was 60. Minister Phil Lineberger was 62. Reverend Allen Rucker was 54. Pastor DB Antrim was 40. (Blair, 2019).

According to a study sponsored by the Christian magazine *Focus on the Family*, "about a quarter of pastors (23 percent), say they've experienced some kind of mental illness, while 12 percent say they received a diagnosis for a mental health condition" (Steiger, 2019). Luckily, most of the 23% do not end up like Jarrid. But that does not lessen the issue of mental illness within the Church. Mental illness, no matter if it ends in suicide or is treated by medication, should not be downplayed, which sadly, the Church has done. Mental illness has been stigmatized within the Church, causing the Church and its congregations to ignore the hurting and broken that they are called to love and accept. Even more so, mental illness struggles that ministers and Church leaders face have been stigmatized. Often these leaders are only allowed to comfort and shepherd others, yet they are usually never allowed to bask in the safe vulnerability they create, leaving them isolated with their struggles. These backward traditions of the Church which leave ministers without the space to speak of their struggles must be changed;

and can be by facing this issue in a new way. The Church can begin to address mental illness instead of ignoring it and pretending it does not exist. Creating a church community of support groups for ministers that encourage vulnerability can decrease stigmatization and address the mental health struggles ministers are facing.

### **Mental Illness and Suicide Within the Church**

Mental illness is not an uncommon occurrence in America today. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, “Nearly 1 in 5 U.S. adults live with a mental illness (46.6 million in 2017)” and of those who deal with mental illnesses, major depressive disorder is “one of the most common mental disorders” (National Institute of Mental Health). Despite these staggering statistics, the ministers of the church are often forgotten in regard to their own mental illnesses and struggles. However, if the statistics reported above hold true, of the roughly 432,600 ministers in America, around 86,520 of those suffer from some form of mental illness (Data USA). More likely than not, the majority of those ministers are not receiving the treatment or counsel that they desperately need. In a recent study done on the care of clergy, researchers found that only 4% of clergy went to denominational staff for help during a time a crisis (*Clergy Well-Being: Seeking Wholeness with Integrity*). With statistics like this, the Church really cannot be that shocked when ministers commit suicide. Yet, this topic is hardly discussed within the Church.

The call to ministry is not an easy one to accept. Choosing to bear the title of “minister” often comes with late nights, early mornings, overtime, criticism, and the constant drain of being a counselor for others. The burnout rates are high for ministers. *Focus on the Family* reported that “only 1 in 10 of those who begin as pastors will retire as ministers” (Steiger). The fact that there is only a ten percent retention rate for this occupation shows the extreme pressure and

expectations in this job and the inadequate amount of support provided. Conditions such as these make it easy for anxiety, loneliness, and depression to arise in ministers. From there, it can quickly spiral into something worse.

And while the burdens of ministry are not the single cause of suicide for ministers, the never-ending list of roles many ministers have to fill wear a person down. According to Pastor Care Inc., “84% of pastors feel they are on call 24/7”. Some ministers leave and go into another profession. Many have to pick up an extra job to pay their bills and quickly experience burnout because “57% of pastors [report] being unable to pay their bills”. Others fall into moral failure and commit a sin that completely ruins their ministry. For more, they have a marriage fall apart or lose their family. Statistics show that “80% [of ministers] believe pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families” (Pastor Care Inc.). The demands of this job can have devastating effects; the statistics alone show that fact. The majority of ministers face struggles due to some aspect of their job, yet “in moments of spiritual crisis, weakness, stress, or struggle, these factors do not necessarily have an impact on the willingness of the pastor to seek professional help” (Salwen, p. 12). Expectations such as having ministers double as the role of counselor for their congregations without giving them the option to be counseled themselves, has created an endless cycle where ministers pour into others with no outlet for themselves.

The long-held stigmatization of mental health within the Church does not help the issue of ministers struggling with mental illness. Ironically, the Church, which in Matthew 25:40, is called to “love the least of these” is often the least accepting of those who suffer from mental illness. Binford Gilbert, author of *The Pastoral Care of Depression: A Guidebook*, writes that he once heard a woman of the church go up to a young girl suffering from multiple sclerosis and asked her “what terrible sin [she had] committed that God would punish [her] in that way?” (86).

Mental illness does not come from a “lack of prayer life” or “stem from one’s darkened soul” or from reading too much *Harry Potter* as a child. In a study done by the Gospel Coalition, researchers found that “48% of self-identified evangelical, fundamentalist, or born-again Christians believe prayer and Bible study alone can overcome mental illness” (Zylstra). Mental illness is not the result of inadequate faith. Instead, mental illness stems from chemical imbalances, trauma, or genetic disorders (Mayo Clinic). The true issue between mental illness and the Church is the lack of understanding many congregations and even some ministers have. In his blog, Jarrid Wilson wrote that, “mental health is definitely [a] topic that Christians around the world must yearn to understand better”. If church members are unable to be accepting of lay people suffering from mental illness, there is no way that ministers can be able to address their own mental illnesses.

Even more stigmatized than mental illness within the Church is suicide. It is a hard thing to understand - someone ending their own life. Among the feelings that one might experience after the loss of someone through suicide, is anger, - “why would they do this to their family”? In America, suicide is at the highest it has been in 50 years; it has jumped so drastically, that the American mortality rate has decreased (Steiger). Christians are often the quickest to assume the eternal damnation of those who die from suicide. Roughly a year before Jarrid Wilson died, he wrote a blog post addressing this topic, entitled “Why Suicide Doesn’t Always Lead to Hell” In the blog, he stated

“You wouldn’t dare say that someone who died of cancer is going to Hell just because of their illness would You? ... Don’t assume someone who died of suicide via severe depression is going to Hell either. Both are illnesses”.

The way someone dies does not decide where they spend eternity. Moreover, Christians do not have the authority to make that decision. Charles Spurgeon once said “the mind can descend far lower than the body, for in it there are bottomless pits...the soul can bleed in ten thousand ways, and die over and over again each hour” (*The Treasury of David*, 1869, p.3). Mental illness causes deeper pain than physical suffering, and until that is understood, the Church cannot really understand the reasons for suicide.

Suicide is a sin; but so is going over the speed limit, or cheating on a test, or gossiping. Romans 3:23 states “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. Doing these things does not mean that one will go straight to Hell. One reason for this persistent belief is the lack of repentance. If someone gossips and regrets it, they can repent of their sins and be forgiven. But if someone dies from suicide, they cannot repent afterwards. However, this decision is not one for people on earth to decide. James 4:12 says, “there is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?” The only one who can guarantee our eternal resting place is God. Christians are offered grace which is granted to us by God and God alone. Everyone is a broken person unworthy of grace, even the seemingly perfect ministers of the Church. Chuck Hannaford, a clinical psychologist who works with the Southern Baptist Convention, stated he has found that “the rate of pastor suicides has increased during his thirty years of practice” (Steiger). With suicide on the rise within the ministry, the pattern of ignoring this problem cannot be continued. The first step to addressing this problem is understanding what mental illness can cause people to do and think. With mental illness, comes pain and hurt that cannot be understood unless someone has experienced it themselves. The long-held traditions of the Church stigmatizing and judging the “least of these” and those who act outside of the social normalcy has to end.

### **Imagining a Vulnerable Community for Ministers**

Christians are called to be in community. The whole Bible reflects the story of companionship. The creation story shows that Adam without Eve was incomplete (Genesis 1). Elijah has Elisha (1 Kings 19). During Jesus' ministry, he surrounded himself with close friends: Peter, James, and John (Mark 14). Paul had Barnabas and Timothy (Acts 14, 16). Priscilla had Aquila (Acts 18). Ministry is not something that should be done alone. Galatians 6:2 calls Christians to "carry each other's burdens". Lifeway Research found that roughly 18% of ministers do not have a single person to confide in with their burdens or personal issues, with an additional 10% only having one person to turn towards. The ever-growing to-do list makes it difficult for numerous ministers to make time for their families, let alone have a relaxing conversation over coffee. Ministers can spend so much time in an office working on their sermon for the following Sunday or coordinating the communion meditation that they lose out on personal interaction. Poor personal relationships can also stem from the idea of being scared to express raw emotions and vulnerability.

So many ministers are scared to show vulnerability. Doing ministry in such a fashion has long been a tradition of the Church. Mandy Smith, author of *The Vulnerable Pastor*, writes that "we often try to overcome emotion with strength" (62). Ministers face numerous barriers when it comes to seeking counseling. The Church has long encouraged the traditions of masculinity and suppressed emotions among leadership, setting unrealistic goals for not only female ministers, but also male ministers. The Church has created a culture where ministers have to appear as perfect individuals and should not share their struggles or downfalls. According to the study *Clergy Well-Being: Seeking Wholeness with Integrity*, "78% of ministers either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'I feel my position as a minister demands perfection'". Churches



carry the ideology that ministers have to be strong individuals if they are to lead a church, rather than all their strength coming from God. This issue partially stems from the problem of hypermasculinity within the Church.

Men within the Church, especially male ministers, are expected to be the epitome of masculinity. They should be emotionless, strong, and the breadwinners for their wife and children. Hypermasculinity, which has long been idealized within the Church, leads to a toxic environment. Smith writes that “we have been told that emotion is weakness and we have also been told that there is no place for weakness in leadership” and that “we are beginning to what unrealistic expectations we have for men” by holding onto these beliefs (p. 63). Breaking this culture requires extreme vulnerability from men as they have to be willing to “step out of the pressure to always be in control” (p. 64). The cycle of men being raised up with the mindset to never break down or express emotions must end in order to address the growing issue of mental illness within ministers.

Doing ministry in this way rejects the model that Christ set for ministers. Time and time again, Jesus was vulnerable. He expressed who he was and what he was feeling. Jesus cursed a fig tree, flipped tables in the Temple, and cried out in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. The Bible encourages vulnerability, because a vulnerable leader is a stronger leader. Henri Nouwen said the “Christian leader of the future is called...to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her vulnerable self” (*In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, p. 30). Encouraging vulnerability within the Church would allow ministers to fully address their mental struggles. It would allow ministers to address their struggles in a community of like-minded people who care about them and allow them to express their true emotions. The Church cannot hold onto the idea that a strong leader is an emotionless leader. 2 Corinthians 12:9

says “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”. God meets us where we are, and in Him, we are made stronger. Churches that encourage a facade in ministers only bring hurt to those involved. It creates unattainable goals that spur on unnecessary stress and anxiety. Ministers need the option to be able to express themselves and be accepted; baggage, shortcomings, mental illness, and all.

Creating space for ministers to be true about their struggles is vital. These safe spaces can present themselves in a number of ways. It could be creating a culture within a church that carries a “come as you are” mentality. There has been the constant mentality within the Church that we should only come on Sundays at our best. People come to church in their “Sunday best”. Others act like a completely different person on Sunday morning versus Saturday night. Jarrid Wilson wrote that “no mess is too messy for the grace of God” (Why Suicide Doesn’t Always Lead to Hell Blog). God meets people wherever they are. Not just the congregants of the church, but God meets the ministers where they are, too. This does not mean that for churches which carry a “come as you are” mentality members should not be constantly striving to cultivate their faith. But if churches only try to put on their best fronts, they will never address the actual struggles people are facing, and growth will never occur. If churches try to ignore the prevalence of mental illness within their walls, it will only exacerbate the issue. Instead of ignoring the issue, it should be talked about.

It could be encouraging congregants and church leaders in sharing their testimonies; because “our stories of human limitations are a kind of confession, and in them we are strangely empowered” (Smith, 2015, pg. 13). The best form of growth comes when aided by community. If a minister is able to freely share their testimony, and with it, their struggles of mental illness, imagine the number of people who will be reached by hearing someone share the Gospel that

struggles just like them. With sharing stories comes better understanding. Ultimately, standing up on a stage and expressing one's most difficult struggles is not as easy as stating it on this page. But even if just a few ministers are able to stand up and express their vulnerabilities it would start a precedent for numerous other ministers. If churches know the mental burdens that a minister is shouldering then they can better care for them. Hebrews 10:25 writes that the early Church "not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another". The Church is called to lean on one another. Understanding those who sit in the pews next to you, or who leads worship on stage, or the ministers who preaches the message every Sunday breaks down barriers. Understanding results in support and encouragement. Understanding results in community. Understanding results in growth and healing. But understanding will not come without proper treatment and care of the church leaders.

### **Viable Solutions**

One practical way to create more support and care for ministers would be bringing in a licensed counselor. So often ministers are required to provide counsel for the congregants within their church. However, the idea of ministers playing the role of counselors only adds onto the demands that ministers are expected to do. Furthermore, most ministers are not licensed counselors, but are approached with the expectation of being able to handle situations like an actual counselor. When churches bring a counselor on staff, it can alleviate numerous pressures that ministers face. Congregants have the option to seek out an actual counselor, resulting in the minister having more time to devote to other aspects of the ministry. Additionally, it also allows the ministers to have someone to seek when they are experiencing their own troubles or struggling with mental illness. Inviting in counselors expands a community within a church. By inviting counselors into churches, the stigma surrounding mental illness can be reduced as

congregants will be able to see someone in the mental health field working in a Christian atmosphere.

Lisa Blankenship, a counselor on staff at First Christian of Johnson City, Tennessee stressed the importance of creating “normalcy” within the Church. She stated that “everyone is in recovery,” with the idea that brokenness is a part of human life. Everyone experiences some type of hardship -- divorce, loss of a loved one, addiction, broken families, or mental illness. In accepting these hardships as common pains of life, the stigma surrounding them can decrease. Not only that, but it allows camaraderie to rise among churches when people realize that others struggle like they do. Creating an atmosphere of “normalcy” such as this, paves the way for ministers to be more open about their struggles with mental illness, as they can find solace in the fact that just like their congregation, they are also in recovery.

The safe communities that ministers need could also be other ministers. It could be strong and supportive leadership within their church. In larger churches, having staff retreats where ministers can escape for a few days with others who understand the weight of ministry can be revitalizing to drained ministers. However, this might not be a viable solution for smaller churches. In my own community, there are a number of smaller churches with minimal staff. To create a form of community for these churches, many of the youth ministers from each church have started meeting with each other once a month. Doing this allows the ministers to share in their struggles with others who experience the same situations. Implementing groups such as these into other small churches could allow for a protected community and possibly even friendships, to form. Even if it is not used as a platform to discuss mental illness, having fellowship with other ministers creates a safe space that is essential not only to a healthy ministry, but also a healthy life.

The role of having a support system is so important in times of struggle for a minister. Having this can allow ministers to take more time for themselves to get the help that they are desperately in need of. Peter Scazzero phrases it like this, “the overall health of any church depends primarily on the emotional and spiritual health of its leadership” (2002, p. 20). The worse the mental health of a minister, the worse the overall health of a church. Ministers are the shepherds for the congregants. That is why it is so vital that the issue of mental health is recognized by the Church. Binford writes that “ministers cannot adequately be servants until they first have been served” (*The Pastoral Care of Depression: A Guidebook*, pg. 89). If ministers are constantly pouring into others without regarding their mental health and overall well-being, eventually they will have nothing left to offer.

The congregants also play a role in creating a stronger community for ministers. Providing support for the minister can be done in a variety of different ways. Congregants can adopt an attitude of positivity, instead of criticizing everything that the minister does. Encouraging the minister helps create an inviting and safe community within the church walls. Congregants can get involved in different ministries within the church to help ease the stresses for ministers having to constantly find volunteers. Lastly, congregants can understand that ministers are not perfect individuals. They are hurting individuals who experience life just as any lay person does. Bearing the title of minister does not make one immune to the pain and struggles of life. Adopting a mindset such as this allows ministers to be more real and vulnerable with the church, and is necessary to allow ministers to face their struggles. So often ministers are there for the congregants at their worst times. Likewise, the congregation should be able to offer the same support for a hurting minister. Just as ministers have an obligation to their church and congregations, so do congregants have an obligation to their minister.

Better ministerial mental health can present itself in other ways, too. The importance of Sabbath within ministry is vital for a healthy ministry. Rest was created by God and is holy. Some churches are already trying to implement practices to allow for intentional rest for their ministers. Mountain Christian Church located in Joppa, Maryland has a “1 in 6” policy. This policy allows church staff to take off one Sunday for every six Sundays that they serve so that they can attend another church and be able to focus on the church service and not their job (Mountain Christian Church Staff Handbook). Unlike most congregations and lay people, Sunday is the busiest day for ministers. According to *Clergy Well-Being Seeking Wholeness with Integrity*, roughly 39% of ministers in America took 3 days or less off in a span of 30 days. Even if a church is unable to implement a program such as the “1 in 6” that Mountain Christian Church is able to do, smaller churches can bring in guest speakers or ask congregants to speak to give the minister a Sunday off every few weeks. Additionally, smaller churches can still be intentional in giving days off for their minister each week. Giving ministers two days off a week can allow them to recharge and be better rested to serve their congregation. Improvements in mental health can also be helped by better physical health. Either it being eating healthier food or working out consistently. In his book *Working the Angles*, Eugene Peterson stresses the importance of Sabbath. He shares how he and his wife would go out on hikes together weekly as their “Sabbath” (p. 81). Creating time away from everyday life is a vital key to our spiritual growth. A safe community for ministers could be found in simple escapes such as these.

Imagining a church that holds these standards true is attainable. But it is not the final result. Jarrid Wilson was extremely vulnerable about his own struggles with mental illness. He opened up saying “as someone who’s struggled with severe depression throughout most of my life, and contemplated suicide on multiple occasions” (Why Suicide Doesn’t Always Lead to

Hell Blog), he understands the pain of mental illness. This is not the ultimate solution. But as of right now, the topic of mental illness and ministers is hardly addressed; so this is a start. Because there might be a minister struggling with mental illness, and having even the slightest bit of hope is all that is needed for the motivation to keep going - in their ministry, marriage, or life.

The Church has the resources to create a better atmosphere for ministers and to cultivate vulnerability. Being a part of a church also means being a part of a larger church family. With that, comes community and fellowship. The Church can be a place of acceptance and love if we learn to stop seeing only a person's faults, but instead learn to love the person. Some Churches have the option and the money to bring on counselors to not only help better serve their congregations, but to also serve their ministry staff. Churches can have retreats for their ministry staff, implement mandatory days-off, and bring on more staff or guest speakers to ease the burdens of requiring so much from one minister. The Church is the Church because of the people within it, and those people can support and lift up one another, and their minister, in the face of struggles. Mental illness is a problem that so many individuals face, and ministers should not be treated any differently or be kept from speaking out simply due to their title. The Church was created for opportunities such as this - to aid the broken in their darkest hours. Some of the most broken and hurting people are the ones standing behind the pulpit every Sunday. The plea from ministers suffering from mental illness is a silent one, but the signs are undeniable. The support for ministers is needed now; the Church cannot ignore it any longer. For Jarrid. For Robert. For Bill. For Teddy. For Larry. For Phil. For Allen. For DB. For their families who are still hurting. For the students in seminary right now. This list cannot grow longer. Imagine a church that is able to prevent it from doing so.

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