

what to do about the doldrums

By Alfred Ells, M.C.



Certainly making a ministry work is an endeavor of vision, prayer, plans and hard work. Ministry is not for the lazy. Pastors are known to work long hours for little compensation. Most would embrace the philosophy: If you want to leave footprints in the sands of time, wear work shoes! But what happens when a pastor becomes weary in doing good?

A national survey reported that 40 percent of surveyed pastors expressed a desire to leave the pastorate because of weariness. What's more, over half of the pastors' spouses surveyed were depressed.

Most pastors I know struggle with the painful feeling of not measuring up, not being who they want to be, or accomplishing what they want. Failure and insecurity are ever present unless the church is growing by leaps and bounds and the coffers are overflowing with money. But outward success doesn't bring lasting feelings of accomplishment. Staff problems and growth challenges arise daily, and new revelation is needed for every Sunday service. All too often the pressure of a pastor's life results in weariness and depression.

"Depression is endemic to ministry," says Pastor Gary Kinnaman of City of Grace Church in Mesa, Ariz. "To make matters worse, pastors hardly ever talk about it, especially if they advocate things like healing, deliverance or faith. After all, the joy of the Lord is your strength! Just believe it!"

So what is the outlook? Are ministers doomed to depression and weariness? Or is there something we are all missing? I believe by fully understanding how God uses life's low moments, it is possible to overcome this common stumbling block.

tips to consider...

Bouts of depression are normal and to be expected in ministry.

The Scriptures say, "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). On a practical basis, that means that every minister with a God-

given vision and calling will encounter powerful spiritual resistance and oppression on more than one occasion, especially when there is much at stake in the Kingdom. The spiritual oppression will often be experienced as torment, anxiety, irritability, anger and depression. Expect this. It comes with the job.

God allows (*creates?*) seasons of difficulty, drudgery and “fruitlessness”.

Most pastors, I am sure, have spoken on the benefit of trials and tribulations (James 1 and Romans 5). God will always make you, as the leader, the first partaker of what he wants to teach those to whom you minister. He puts you through the grinder longer, harder and more profoundly so you can offer others the hope he gives you. You cannot give what you do not have. Expect to be depressed as you endure the difficulties and battles of your life and ministry. Your vicarious experience of His death enables you to share hope and life with others.

Every dark night of the soul will both tempt you and refine you.

During your weariness and depression, old negative habits and ungodly temptations will return. Existing weaknesses may be magnified and you will become even more disappointed with yourself and others. If you but endure the trials and temptations, you will emerge refined. You will be more understanding of your own and others' sins and weaknesses, and more grateful for His grace. Also the endurance alone will help bring some aspects of your flesh to death; the power of your inner needs and desires will diminish.

You don't have to take this lying down.

Feelings of depression are indicators that our soul is deeply affected by the events of life and we are in despair, possibly of life itself. Moses, Elijah, Jonah, David, and Paul (to name a few heroes of the faith) all experienced depression. The first and most important step is to recognize that you are struggling with feelings of weariness, hopelessness, despair and depression. Once you recognize this, you can take steps to break their power.

Your depression indicates God wants you to change something.

All of us know that we need to change. None of us is perfect. Difficult and painful struggles that result in depression indicate that God is working on changing some aspect of our lives. Usually, He either desires more brokenness in our life or He is toughening us up. Either result is more quickly obtained through surrender. Surrender is the ability to give up control. When we decide to give Him total control in whatever we are struggling with, we place our complete faith and trust in Him regardless of the outcome. Such abandonment to Him releases our anxieties and helps lift the darkness.

Though natural, depression is more powerful in some people than others.

No two of us are alike. Everyone's chemistry and personality is unique. Many in ministry come from family backgrounds where depression is genetic. Such individuals become easily depressed due to brain chemistry. "Be careful, therefore, not to judge another by your circumstance," according to 2 Corinthians 12:12. If depression seems to come too easily or stay too long, it is essential that you seek help from a qualified professional to ensure depression does not control your life.

While depressed, you may question your relationship with God.

Do not worry about being angry with God or questioning your faith when depressed. This also is a common occurrence. Others, such as Job and Elijah, also questioned Him in their times of depression. Instead, remember not to doubt in the darkness what was revealed to you in the light. Write down what you believed before you became depressed, and remember that two of the key aspects of depression are negative thinking and self-deprecation. You are going to think the worst of God and yourself. He knows this. Do not take this symptom too seriously.

Seek another—besides your spouse—to share with.

Depression grows worse when hidden. When you bring your feelings and thoughts out into the light with someone you trust, the issues that God wants to deal with will surface more clearly. The depression will lift, and joy and anticipation will return. Rarely will God allow us to deal with ourselves all by ourselves. Remember, we are to be models of His grace so that others may see and also experience Him. Therefore there is no shame in your struggle. A word of caution: Sharing with someone who is trusted and qualified does not mean sharing your depression with the congregation. That comes when your experience has been seasoned by time and wisdom.

If you believe you are depressed and think you may benefit from counseling, contact Leaders that Last at info@leadersthatlast.org for more information.