

**When Stress and Ministry Collide**

Stress is a predictable experience in life, especially in the age of COVID. Members are looking to their church family for support and encouragement while pastors and staff are wrestling with their own personal and ministry needs. Pastors from a cross section of CMBA churches recently shared about their experiences coping with stress. While reported anonymously, their answers can offer insights to fellow pastors and church members alike.

In his 30 years spent pastoring, one CMBA pastor says the stress of serving during a pandemic was at a whole new level “and the bar has raised a few times” during the last few months. When his church, located in a growing and diverse community, stopped meeting for live worship, he and his staff went full steam ahead ministering to so many different people that now he wonders if they have spread themselves too thin and might face burn out.

“One of the biggest dangers to a pastor is being isolated, and I’m as guilty as anyone. It’s hard to make time to reach out to other pastors for support,” he says.

Some emotional tolls of the pandemic are easier to identify than others. Since March, one smaller membership church pastor reports that two couples from his congregation have ended their marriages and 10 church members have died. Many pastors say the usual stress of ministry to grieving families has been amplified by not being able to visit with the sick and dying or hold visitations and funerals.

“On the mental health side of things, it definitely increases stress to be ministering to people whose worlds are falling apart. I’ve tried to make sure our deacons and small group leaders are also reaching out and making contact with our members,” one pastor shares.

Another pastor said, somewhat jokingly, that his seminary preparation did not include leading during a pandemic, but he does see his leadership role in the church bearing a unique level of stress. He describes the reality that “all eyes were on him” to lead effectively in a helpless situation. “God called me to preach and I can handle leading and making those decisions. There are people to help coach you through the work of being a pastor to help prepare you, but this had no warning. I felt alone and didn’t know what to do.”

One pastor’s stress manifested in symptoms that needed to be monitored overnight in the hospital. A younger pastor recalls sitting at his desk a few months into quarantine “stressing himself out for no particular reason.” He recognized that he was putting almost twice the amount of effort into the normal routines of operating the church and could see the impossible task of making everyone happy. He became intentional about taking breaks to relax.

“I couldn’t keep that up and knew that wasn’t a good way to live. It’s difficult to take care of myself, but stress will take a toll on you day in and day out,” he says.

One CMBA pastor has studied mental health and is currently completing a degree in clinical counseling. Students enrolled in this course of study are required to see a counselor as part of their training. This pastor says all pastors should consider meeting with a counselor specifically for the mental health benefit. He recalls the shock of a counselor once asking what he did for fun – because he had no answer to give.

“I realized I’d reached a point in life where I was just working and caring for my family. So, I started mountain biking. I recently spent three weeks on a cross-country trip with a friend who helps get me out of the role of ‘pastor.’ When you’re a pastor, it’s like you’re a pilot but you’re never really off the plane,” he says, highlighting the importance of churches supporting ministers having uninterrupted time away.

Hobbies were frequently mentioned sources of stress relief for the pastors, including one that bought a bass boat in quarantine so that he could take others with him on fishing trips. One pastor likes to work in his yard or find other forms of physical activities to clear his mind and another says he’s begun to reinvest in friendships, starting with seminary friends he hadn’t talked to in years.

CMBA pastors’ experiences are in line with Barna research on a larger group of pastors during the pandemic that was [reported](https://www.barna.com/research/jon-tyson-online-ministry/) in early August 2020. One-third of pastors participating in the Barna study reported being at risk for burn out. Relating to congregational health, the same study reports nine out of 10 pastors believe the pandemic will disrupt fall outreach efforts and one out of five pastors say their congregation’s personal faith journeys will diminish as a direct result of COVID.

“The church we all pastored prior to the third Sunday of March 2020 is gone. If you’re trying to lead your congregation back into that church, you risk messing up. Sometimes pastors and members struggle with that [realization],” says one pastor, who adds communication is key to decreasing stress for everyone involved.

There are full-time and bivocational pastors in the CMBA and, while each has similar ministry expectations, they differ in amounts of devoted work time to the local church. One pastor says he has reduced some of his stress levels by bringing more people into the decision-making process in recent months. Another says churches can support pastors by allowing the hiring of necessary staff positions.

“Once a church is over 100 members, research says a pastor becomes the ‘busy gardener’ without other staff support. He can’t get all the ‘weeds’ pulled because he’s so busy running around and unable to cultivate the ‘roots.’ Having an associate has really helped me, but many pastors in churches my size don’t have one. A congregation that tithes and agrees to hire enough staff can help reduce stress by not putting everything all on the pastor,” he says.

CMBA churches have been creative in their encouragement to staff. The pastors report receiving large expressions of appreciation like lending time at vacation homes, and receiving letters, phone calls, texts and surprise gifts at their front door. Each served as an affirmation that boosted their spirits, even for the moment.

As they navigate uncharted COVID waters moving forward, the pastors share messages of hope and new work. Most are seeing faithful giving of tithes and offerings, with one pastor reporting a 30-percent increase compared to this time last year. Several note seeing how God is reshaping their congregations after stripping away the familiar and how the situation has provided opportunities to create new and meaningful worship experiences.

“We are working hard to minister to everyone during this time, our message has been ‘leave no one behind,’” one pastor says of the mission. Citing the importance of continued cooperation, another says having an association “where a pastor can get support, encouragement and authentic relationships is more important now than ever.”