
Ministerial Depression: the way in and the way out

An anonymous pastor

The purpose of this paper is to give an honest account of my experience of depression and breakdown in the ministry and to seek to share lessons from it. I am doing it with a view to my own benefit as well as for the benefit of others. I didn't keep any record of events and memory soon fades. I do this very aware of a number of weaknesses in what I am doing

It won't be relevant to every one

In a recent review of a book on depression the reviewer pointed out that experience of depression is very personal and that one person's experience may be of limited help to others. I myself found that tapes on ministerial depression which I was lent, which I know have been very helpful to others, were almost irrelevant to me. My hope is however that my experience may strike chords with others and so help them.

Depression is not unique to ministers

Mid-life crises and depressions happen to many middle-aged men and therefore general advice on depression may be helpful to all of us. However there are certain unique features of the ministerial life, and so of ministerial depression, which justify the distinction made. A friend who has been actively involved as an elder in evangelical churches for many years told me recently how entering a pastorate had greatly changed his perspective on church life.

I don't highlight some important things

My wife's love and support was constant and I could take it for granted. Without this the pathway would have been far darker, and the failure to highlight this, and some other positive and negative aspects of my situation, doesn't mean they are not significant.

The Events that took place up to the breakdown

Up to the time of my illness I was extremely busy in a demanding pastorate, with various extra-church activities. I had been over ten years in a pastorate which continued to be extremely difficult for a number of reasons. Though the church had been generally evangelical during its past history the last two pastorates had been short and not particularly strong. The last major pastorate was doctrinally very influenced by the pastor's background in Pentecostalism and British Israelism. This meant that he had no real doctrine of the church and his approach had been controlled by an unhelpful pragmatism. This left its mark both in church practice and the attitudes of many of the church members. Since then a number of people, from very different evangelical backgrounds, had joined the church and had very different views about church life and as to what the church's future might be. These factors meant that there was no real consensus about what the church members were seeking in a pastor. This showed more and more in divisive and unhelpful attitudes as time went by. In retrospect it is clear

that several groups all had their own agenda for the future church and my success was measured only in terms of that agenda and not in terms of the progress of God's kingdom. In addition I often found that they had formulated their agenda in ways which sprang from unspoken and not-thought-through assumptions from their own background. This meant that there was a great deal of criticism without any clear suggestions as to what we actually ought to be doing.

Factors that particularly affected me were:-

i) the absence of any kind of church discipline for behaviour which was blatantly unchristian, and in some cases clearly immoral, and the lack of support and the opposition I encountered when I made any attempt to set standards.

ii) well established and antagonistic leadership in some departments of the church's life which meant that some areas of the church's life were sealed against me and that some people were either cut off from my influence or, in a number of cases, turned against me. This did have very damaging effects on people who had actually been converted through my ministry and who needed help and support but were alienated from me because of the influence of 'friends'.

iii) desertion by 'evangelical' members of the church who in leaving wrote off the church and my ministry, often saying some deeply hurtful things about my ministry and about me in doing so. For some reason this was a repeated experience over a number of years and always seemed to affect people with great potential to provide valuable future leadership in the church. Both my wife and I were deeply hurt and bewildered when people whom we had befriended and supported turned against us. Particularly as they were those in whom we had invested much hope for the future.

iv) a lack of support and sympathy for a biblical, viewpoint on abortion, women's ministry, ecumenism and other crucial pressure areas in modern church life. The church's paper acceptance of the Scriptures as, 'our only rule of faith and practice' seemed to be just that, a paper acceptance. Such mental and spiritual estrangement from people in the church cannot be reversed in the short term and leads to continual strain and tension on those in leadership.

In any honest assessment of a breakdown we also have to look at personal factors which affected the situation. There are several:-

Weaknesses

My mother points out that as a little boy I was easily discouraged and hurt. This factor certainly affected me and especially so when it seemed that there was no approval for my ministry forthcoming from either church members or the Lord. Often we felt let down by people but it hurt far more that the Lord didn't step in with clear and obvious blessing and so vindicate and reassure us.

Mistakes made by me

I did not succumb to the dangers of siding with a group in the church and thereby producing party spirit but I was unduly pessimistic about the chances of people changing and was not sufficiently inventive of ways around seeming impasses in church life. In some respects I put this down to a crucial lack of faith. In addition, my preaching did sometimes show the hurt I was feeling and probably polarised people rather than won them over. I fear my ministry was truthful but sometimes deficient in encouragement and love; though I think this sprung from near despair rather than

vindictiveness. I was completely unaware of the effect my feelings were having on my preaching and only a chance remark by a very devoted and loyal church member about my 'telling us off' when preaching alerted me to what I was doing.

Isolation

While there were a number of dear and godly people in the church, who I loved and respected, there was simply no-one with whom I was able to establish any sort of close friendship. I have always been a person who likes and needs to have friends around and this isolation, which I know from conversations and observation affects many professional people in middle life, became intensely difficult to cope with.

Overwork

This is easier described than cured. What do you do in a smallish church with no-one willing to act as Church Secretary? You do the job yourself and that adds to your strains. However, for those with a fragile self-image, sheer hard work and hoped-for approval of others outside the church is a powerful motive to add to an already crushing workload. It can be almost a badge of honour for a minister to be told how tired they are looking and to work without a day off.

Felt lack of success

While we saw conversions through door-to-door evangelism and from within the church we saw no numerical growth, partly due to the age composition of the church, and this was deeply depressing to me. Add to that the church's downtown location and securing church growth is extremely difficult. If others were not condemning me as ineffective, and that was not infrequent, then I was condemning myself.

An additional precipitating factor was difficulties I found in some extra-church interests

Like many pastors in difficult pastorates I had coped by using outside interests, such as denominational involvement and fraternal involvement, as a relief from church tensions and as a means of encouragement. For various reasons, some of which involved disagreements with others whose opinions were significant to me, these outlets became very unsatisfactory in the short term and became emotionally draining when I desperately needed support and positive feedback. Quite unknown to them, and I am sure unintentionally, I was deeply affected by disagreements with, and felt disapproval from, one or two senior men in the ministry.

The Breakdown Itself

There were a number of symptoms appearing as the depression mounted.

i) *I was unable to sleep properly and would either stay awake till 3am or wake up at 3am and be completely unable to get back to sleep.* At first I responded in the most macho way possible by getting up early and working but this couldn't be sustained for long.

ii) *I was unable to study properly because concentration was difficult.* This was very discouraging because producing fraternal papers and other contributions of this kind was an important source of encouragement and an avenue of hoped-for approval for me. This way of coping was no longer available to me.

iii) *I had a feeling of worthlessness and didn't expect others to like me or respond to my ministry.* I quite seriously believed that no-one could want or value my friendship.

iv) *Criticism, which was always very painful, became disabling.* After one visit from a church attender which began, 'After the children's talk I get absolutely nothing from the service'. I was unable to preach the following Sunday. This fragility continued and became worse.

v) *I completely despaired about my ministry and, though I had no real sense of being led to another pastorate, felt that I had to leave the church and try somewhere else.* Not receiving a call from another church when seeking to move added to my hurt. I at no time had any desire to be out of the ministry but believed I couldn't stay where I was.

These factors finally mounted up to the point where I was unable to function any longer as a pastor and therefore I was forced to take sick leave. Rather than relieve the situation my symptoms actually became a lot worse:-

i) *I felt as if surrounded by a thick fog and as though I couldn't communicate to anyone at all.* My wife tells me that I hardly spoke to her for several months.

ii) *I lost assurance, not of personal salvation but of God's existence, and would wake up in the middle of the night almost screaming, terrified of dying.* This was not entire disbelief and never became so but it was a constant temptation and pressure.

iii) *I had a terror of inactivity and had to work with my hands all day.* I couldn't face the thoughts inside although I was not at this stage really identifying what was wrong. This desperate need to be active is very atypical of those suffering from depression. It was however my way of avoiding my demons rather than confronting them.

iv) *I felt a deep anger because I felt that people treated me as less than human and that my feelings were treated as being of no account.* I felt I had become a rôle and not a person: someone who people could and did insult and abuse but who was not allowed to retaliate or to feel and show hurt. I felt these feelings could easily erupt into violence.

This emotional collapse continued for several months but there was slow improvement and after six months I was able to return to preaching once a week. The ten hours therapeutic work a week allowed without affecting benefit meant that I did little but prepare and preach. Another six months later I resumed work on a full-time basis but with very limited input to the church. Over four years later I am just about resuming most of my former responsibilities.

Recovery

What aided my emergence from depression? There were a number of factors:-

An understanding psychiatrist

The first psychiatrist I saw was very confident that medication would work the trick but no medication seemed to shift my mood in the slightest. He was quite frank that he saw no way of helping me by counselling but passed me on to another psychiatrist. She was immensely helpful. She was not an evangelical but was certainly open to spiritual realities in her dealings with me. Cognitive therapy, which was the approach she used, was a helpful challenge to depressed thinking. My expressed feelings such as, 'I'm a failure' would be met by the rejoinder, 'Come back next week and show me from what's happened in your ministry that you're a failure!' Surprisingly the evidence was that I was not as much a failure as I felt!

More important was her acceptance of my belief system. On one occasion she asked me, 'What passage in the Bible would you turn to in order to express your present

feelings? I'll read them and come back to discuss them with you next week.' My choice of Jeremiah 20:7-18, 'O Lord, you deceived me ...' and Jeremiah 12:1-13 left her somewhat depressed herself. I myself was greatly helped as Scripture is so honest about what God's servants do actually feel and experience and is equally open about the fact that there are no readily available cures.

On another level we simply got on well and I felt, for the first time in years, that I was talking to someone who genuinely liked me and cared about what I was feeling. It is a sad fact that this alone was very important to me.

A spiritual crisis

While I don't feel backsliding or tolerated sin had led to my depression, I certainly felt great difficulty in accepting my experiences of years of hard slog in the ministry, little by way of conversions and blessings, and now this complete breakdown of usefulness. One Sunday night when I was sitting in the congregation of our own church things came to a crisis. That night the attendance was particularly low and I went home distraught. Lying in bed in the early hours of Monday morning the spiritual root of my unhappiness finally emerged. It was that in my heart of hearts I felt that the Lord had let me down. Strangely, until that night, I had not been at all aware that I felt this and if asked would have denied it with absolute sincerity.

As I shared this with those who were trying to help me their reactions were interesting. One senior minister obviously found it hard to cope with and seemed to withdraw from me because of it. Though that may be an unfair judgement of his behaviour stemming from the inaccurate judgements of others and their behaviour it is easy to make in a time of depression. The psychiatrist listened to what I said and responded, 'Well, you don't believe that do you? How are you going to deal with it?' In retrospect I believe the Lord graciously withheld the identification of this problem from me till I was able to respond to it appropriately.

God's grace at work in the church

One unusual aspect of my experience has been that I have been able to resume serving the Lord in the pastorate that I was in before my breakdown. Several things happened to enable this:-

a) God raising up leaders in the church

After some very unsatisfactory experiences it was wonderful to have one or two people of real ability and spirituality move into leadership positions. Humanly speaking without them the road back would have been almost impossible.

b) the contribution of neighbouring ministers

One neighbouring minister helped greatly by accepting involvement in the church and chairing deacons's and members' meetings. This enabled younger leaders to establish themselves in leadership and encouraged them when it was very difficult.

c) God uniting the church in love

In God's providence a factor in precipitating my breakdown, though not causing it, was a horrific car accident which involved a church member and her family. I had to spend time with the grief stricken family, I sat with the lady when the life support machine was turned off and then conducted the funeral and continued to support the family. After this much misunderstanding and estrangement within the church melted

away. The church became far more united with one another and with me during my absence than they had been with me there.

d) *God working in people's hearts*

Miraculously even people who were strongly and overtly opposed to me were changed by God's grace. This sometimes happened when people were challenged by others about their attitudes to me but sometimes there has simply been a manifest change without any confrontation taking place. This has been and continues to be a wonderful kindness from the Lord.

Moving on from Breakdown

Nearly five years later, I still cannot work as intensely or for as long as I used to. My ability to study and prepare has been impaired noticeably. When I am tired or going through stressful times I have a tendency to slip back into depression with a sense of failure and hopelessness and a fear of death dominating me.

However, without any significant numerical growth having taken place, there is a deeper unity in the church and we can now move on and make decisions and develop as a church in a way we couldn't before. There are a number of lessons I have learnt and am endeavouring to put into practise:-

i) *To be gentler with those who doubt and are weak in faith.* Prior to my illness I couldn't easily understand those who had trouble believing what I was clear and certain about. That has changed a lot and I know these changes in me have proved helpful to some people.

ii) *To accept God's calling for me.* Lack of acclamation and acceptance by others doesn't not mean that I am not doing God's will. Paul accepts his life, '*being poured out like a drink offering*' (2 Timothy 4:6) which means that its significance is solely godward. I am trying to learn to think like that.

iii) *To accept other people's insights and judgements on situations in the church and also on the way I am reacting to those situations.* I am thankful for those in the church who are concerned for the good of God's kingdom and for my good. They may be wrong in their assessments from time to time but I trust them because they don't have a hidden agenda and when they rebuke me or disagree with me it is with good motives.

iv) *To seek to persuade people and encourage them to obedience rather than to come down heavily on their disobedience.* To show them that what I desire from them is actually what the gospel requires of them.

In Retrospect

A little while has elapsed since writing this and again our church life is passing through a difficult time. We like to think that times of difficulty lead to times of blessing but they may be to prepare us to glorify God in further times of difficulty and discouragement. I am still prone to be discouraged and not a particularly innovative leader so these are hard lessons. What is still a rich blessing is the love and encouragement received through both church officers and members as shared experiences of joy and sadness have forged deep spiritual bonds.

For obvious reasons this article has been written anonymously
