

When depression leads pastors to suicide: One out of four pastors is depressed

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What kind of personal pain would cause a 42-year-old pastor to abandon his family, his calling and even life itself? Members of a Baptist church in Hickory, North Carolina, are asking that question after their pastor committed suicide in his parked car in September.

Those who counsel pastors say Christian culture, especially southern evangelicalism, creates the perfect environment for depression. Pastors suffer in silence, unwilling or unable to seek help or even talk about it. Sometimes they leave the ministry. Occasionally the result is the unthinkable.

Experts say clergy suicide is a rare outcome to a common problem. But Baptists in the Carolinas are soul searching after a spate of suicides and suicide attempts by pastors. In addition to the recent suicide of David Treadway, two pastors in North Carolina attempted suicide and three in South Carolina died by suicide, all in the past four years.

Being a pastor—a high-profile, high-stress job with nearly impossible expectations for success—can send one down the road to depression, according to pastoral counselors.

“We set the bar so high that most pastors can’t achieve that,” said H. B. London, vice president for pastoral ministries at Focus on the Family, based in Colorado Springs, Colorado. “And because most pastors are people-pleasers, they get frustrated and feel they can’t live up to that.”

When pastors fail to live up to demands imposed by themselves or others, they often “turn their frustration back on themselves,” leading to self-doubt and feelings of failure and hopelessness, said Fred Smoot, executive director of Emory Clergy

Care in Duluth, Georgia, which provides pastoral care to 1,200 United Methodist ministers in Georgia.

A pastor is like “a 24-hour ER” who is supposed to be available to any congregant at any time, said Steve Scoggin, president of CareNet, a network of 21 pastoral counseling centers in North Carolina. “We create an environment that makes it hard to admit our humanity.”

It’s a job that breeds isolation and loneliness—the pastorate’s “greatest occupational hazards,” said Scoggin, who counsels many Baptist and other ministers. “These suicides are born out of a lack of those social supports that can intervene in times of personal crisis.”

No one knows for sure how many ministers suffer depression or attempt suicide. “It’s like nailing Jell-O to the wall,” said London. But he estimated that 18 to 25 percent of all ministers are depressed at any one time.

Most counselors and psychologists interviewed for this article agreed that depression among clergy is at least as prevalent as in the general population. As many as 12 percent of men and 26 percent of women will experience major depression during their lifetime, according to the American Medical Association.

“The likelihood is that one out of every four pastors is depressed,” said Matthew Stanford, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Baylor University in Texas.

Anxiety and depression in the pulpit have become “markedly higher” in the past five years, said Smoot. “The current economic crisis has caused many of our pastors to go into depression.” Besides the recession’s strain on church budgets, depressed pastors increasingly report frustration over their congregations’ resistance to cultural change.

Most cases of depression do not lead to suicide, but almost all suicides begin with depression. Depression causes two-thirds of the 30,000 suicides reported each year, the AMA reports.

Nearly two out of three depressed people don’t seek treatment, according to studies by the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance. Counselors say even fewer depressed ministers get treated because of career fears, social stigma and spiritual taboo. “Clergy do not talk about it because it violates their understanding of their

faith,” said Scoggin. “They believe they are not supposed to have those kinds of thoughts.”

The recent case of David Treadway, pastor of Sandy Ridge Baptist Church in Hickory, was the exception. He told his congregation he was in treatment several months before his suicide. Still, the shock was hard to absorb, co-workers said.

Rodney Powe, worship pastor at that church, said he only now understands that depression is a mental illness. Christians who don’t experience depression trivialize it, he said. “We just say, ‘Come on, get over it. We have the hope of Christ and the Holy Spirit.’”

Baylor’s Stanford, who studies how the Christian community deals with mental illness, said depression in Christian culture carries “a double stigmatization.” For pastors, treatment can come at a high price. “You are committing career suicide if you have to seek treatment,” said Stanford, “particularly if you have to take time off.”

Society still places a stigma on mental illness, but Christians make it worse, he said, by “overspiritualizing” depression and other disorders—dismissing them as a lack of faith or a sign of weakness.

Polite southern culture adds its own taboo. The result is a culture of avoidance. “You can’t talk about it before it happens and you can’t talk about it after it happens,” said Monty Hale, director of pastoral ministries for the South Carolina Baptist Convention.

In some settings, however, it is becoming a little more acceptable for clergy to get treatment, he said. The good news, said Smoot, is “most pastors don’t stay depressed. They find a way out of that frustration.”

Added CareNet’s Scoggin: “Depression is part of the human condition; some people simply find ways to gracefully live with it. Like other chronic illnesses, you may not get over it.” —Greg Warner, *Religion News Service*