

Three things that pastors are not

By [Jeff Nelson](#)

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A couple of weeks ago, funeral director Caleb Wilde wrote a blog post about who to seek out when dealing with grief. His basic advice—[find a therapist before you seek out your pastor](#). The reasoning goes that therapists, with their training in the psychological aspects that arise in times of grief, are better qualified than clergy to deal with things like depression.

I agree. In fact, this article caused me to think about a few roles that pastors are expected to take on to varying degrees, but ultimately are unqualified to fulfill. Beyond a few continuing education classes that help us better understand some of the issues that inevitably arise in ministry with individuals or organizations, to be a pastor is to be one thing and not another. A certain amount of dabbling is inevitable and a certain amount of understanding is necessary, but there come points when certain issues are best left to the experts.

So I present three things that pastors are not, even though at times maybe we or our parishioners think we are or want us to be.

1. Therapists. Let's start with the one that Caleb mentions in his post. In many traditions, pastors are encouraged to become familiar with certain psychological terms and concepts: the stages of grief, forms of mental illness and the way they affect individuals, families, and systems, and certain care techniques such as active listening. However, pastors are certainly not qualified to diagnose or treat the conditions that they learn about. We learn about them so that we know what to watch for and when to refer to one with proper training and expertise.

That being said, pastors are trained in pastoral care. We do quite a bit of listening and talking with people who need someone to lean on and to process problems and experiences. But we're meant to do this while prayerfully seeking an awareness of how God is with the person and to share knowledge and resources accordingly. Sometimes the person talking things out is enough, sometimes one needs to vent, sometimes one needs a listening ear and an empathetic companion. Pastors can be

that, but when the issues include psychological and emotional factors that require a different kind of listening and conversation, then someone else needs to be in on that person's care as well.

We give pastoral care. Not counseling. Not therapy. It takes some discernment to figure out where the line is, but there is a line.

2. Case managers. Let's be clear up front. The church is called to serve in mission. The church is called to help people. The church is called to live out Jesus' commandment to love one's neighbor and to attend to the needs of people as they are created in the image of God, and doing to "these little ones" is as doing to Christ himself as in Matthew 25. At the same time, the church only has so many resources and is in most instances not equipped to help an individual or family for an indefinite period of time, particularly if the problems involved run much deeper and are more systemic than needing help with an electric bill.

This extends to pastors who, in my experience, are sometimes consulted not just for money for gas, food, and rent, but also occasionally for counsel as to where to find a job, to be a reference when getting a loan, to track down leads on places to live. As with therapists, there are qualified social programs for each of these issues that again include people trained in what to watch for and how to handle those caught up in such a frustrating and self-fulfilling cycle that may include factors such as addiction, mental illness, and a lack of life management skills.

For the most part, pastors and churches can provide some financial assistance and food, but there are usually deeper issues at play that we are unqualified to address. Again, referrals are necessary here.

3. CEOs. Again, let's be clear about something: the church has an administrative side that pastors inevitably need to know about and advise. But it remains that we are pastors, not business executives. We are not the ones who should be entrusted with managing budgets, signing building contracts, and brokering deals. We are, for all intents and purposes, the Chief Operating Officer who by default may see to many of the church's day-to-day operation, and we may be entrusted with casting a vision for the congregation. But this is meant to be a vision that is grounded in how to be faithful to the gospel, and how to embody God's love as revealed in Christ to fellow members and to the surrounding community. It is not meant to be a vision grounded in numbers of members or cash flow or building bigger barns. We may

inevitably have a hand in the business side of a church's life, but if we make it the main thing, we're pursuing a different calling.

There are probably others that can be added to this list, but these are the top three erroneous pastoral images that I've faced. But this is only part of the picture, of course. If we strip away some of the things a pastor is not, what can we say that a pastor is?

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