

What the church can't do for pastors

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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A friend was going to seminary, and she became very disappointed that someone in her home church did not send her a birthday card. When I heard this story, I thought that the church probably did her a favor, because it's good to know that there are a lot of things that the church cannot do for you once you become a pastor.

The church can't be our best friend. I'm not someone who thinks we can't be friends with our parishioners. I have worshiped with many people I would hang out with outside of my church duties. In general, I like people and I relate to most people as friends.

That said, the church cannot be our best friend. The church will let us down, and when that happens, we all need someone to call. We can't depend on the church to throw us birthday parties or notice when we're depressed. It's just not their job. So keep your BFF. You might feel like you don't have any time for that person now that you're a pastor, but you need to make time. You're going to need them.

The church can't be our therapist. Being a minister pulls a lot out of us. We regularly wrestle with death, think about family systems, and learn to handle criticism. Things that many people can bury and not think about on a day-to-day basis, confront us as we struggle with deep existential questions.

All of this presents us with puzzles that we need help to sort out. It would be easy to start relying on the church to examine all the pieces with us. But the church cannot be our therapist. The pulpit cannot be the place where we sort out the day's psychological issues. We all need a counselor, someone who is skilled at looking at our complex psychological issues. So we can make an appointment, and when we have things more resolved, then we can talk with the church. But we cannot rely solely upon them to solve what's inside of us.

The church cannot grant us healthy self-esteem. It's easy to spot a narcissistic pastor. Not only are there a lot out there, but they're relying on the church to build

up their self-esteem. Often a narcissist has been abused or neglected in the past, so they use people and things around them to fill that emotional void. The problem is that sometimes they have not been shown how to see the emotional needs of other people. So they take all that emotional energy without giving any back.

When we need a healthy self-esteem, either because we're narcissistic or we have a low self-esteem, the church is a terrible place to right-size our ego. Sometimes people will detest us for random reasons, like the tenor of our voice reminds them of their mother's. Other times people will idealize us, assuming that we are much more spiritual than we actually are. Either way, we need to do the difficult work of finding emotional support outside of the church. If we solely depend on the church to do that work, we will end up crushed or inflated.

Am I saying that the church will never be our friend, help us sort out our psychological concerns, or make us feel good about ourselves in a healthy sort of way? Of course not. A church can do all of these things. But a healthy congregation does not exist to serve its pastor in those ways. And we need to make sure that we have some structures of emotional support and be striving for health as we serve our congregations.