

Anxiety

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I'm not sure why the pastorate produces so much anxiety. I suppose you have the performative aspects of it. After so many years, I still toss and turn until my sheets twist into a jumbled mess the night before a sermon or lecture. My mind preaches all night, figuring out how to say it better. I never seem to get to that point of deep sleep.

Then there are the 40-year declining stats that people expect the pastor to turn around immediately, even though he or she has only been serving the church for two years.

There is the constant criticism. People complain about literally *everything*--from the way that you put on your lipstick, to how you run a meeting, to what key the hymn was in, to what your kids wear, to the typos in the bulletin, to whether the paraments were hanging slightly askew. Believe me, I can go on, but you get the idea.

Then there is the money. We are losing a generous generation that had a lot of disposable income, especially in their retirement years. Now adults are emerging who have very little money, because so much of it is going into the student loan debt they were forced to take on before they were legally able to order a beer.

It might be one of these things, or all of them. Or the other stresses of life—like our own student loan debt, the inability to afford to live in the neighborhood that the church is located, the job's time constraints that cause us to miss family events, or the struggle with our own identity and insecurities of the calling.

Anyways, church leaders get anxious. So, what do we do about it? There are the long-term things—get eight hours of sleep, exercise, set time boundaries, take vacations, and limit expectations. See a spiritual director or a counselor. Make sure that you nurture your friendships.

But sometimes you're ready to go into a meeting, and you smell the whiff of smoke. And you find out that someone is passing out pitchforks and torches, and you're pretty sure that you're going to be burned at the stake by the end of the agenda.

You have 20 minutes. What do you do?

These are the things I do before such meetings.

- Sit down, close your eyes, and breathe. Your breath may be choppy. That's okay. That's fear. Keep breathing deeply. Remember that your breath is spirit. God's Spirit animates you. Wake up to God surrounding you and embracing you.

- I typically imagine one of two things, at this point.

- 1) **You are rising above the chaos.** Somehow, try to transcend time and space. Look down on the conflict. See how small it is? See how little difference it will make if you win or lose this? Imagine how large your calling is in God. Now look with compassion on the people involved. Think about what has wounded them. Why are they lashing out? Keep breathing and keep rising above it.

- 2) **Imagine a stream.** There are leaves floating on the stream, pulsing down the river. Think about the fear that is gripping you. It feels giant, like a mass of things crushing you. But try to imagine one thing. Put that one thing on the leaf. Imagine it floating down the river. Now, think of the next anxiety inducing thing. Put it on the next leaf. Watch it float down the river. Keep on doing this, as you breathe deeply.

It's a stressful job. And it's easy to get caught up in the petty arguments and lose sight of the fullness of what God calls us to be. But keep breathing. Rise above. Or watch your fears stream down the river. Or, what do you do with your anxiety?