

Introduction

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If you're reading this book then I'm willing to bet one of three things: one, you are currently suffering from symptoms of depression, two, you have suffered them in the past, or, three, you know of someone who is. Even if none of these things apply to you, then it's reasonable to suggest that they might at some point in the future.

The fact is, mental health issues – particularly those associated with depression and anxiety – are incredibly common. A 2014 NHS research paper found that 1-in-6 people have a common mental health disorder.¹ And according to the mental health charity Mind, 1-in-4 people in England will experience some form of mental health problem each year. The Mental Health Foundation,

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who have been tracking the effect of the coronavirus pandemic, report that indicators of loneliness, suicidality and an inability to cope with stress are worse now than they were at the start of 2020.² Mental health issues are all around us. While it's always hard to quantify these things, it's not a stretch to suggest that we live during a time when these issues are particularly heightened.

Despite the prevalence of mental health issues in society, many Christians still believe that pastors don't really get depressed. Others might struggle in that way, so the sentiment goes, but pastors, surely, are more resilient. At any rate, isn't the church more nurturing and the Holy Spirit doing something or other (it's never quite clear what) so that pastors don't suffer in that way? Others accept that pastors suffer from depression but, as someone once commented to me, 'I didn't think pastors got depressed *like that!*' In other words, its perfectly reasonable for pastors to occasionally feel a bit down, but pastors don't get so ill that they need to be hospitalised or become suicidal.

This book exists to show that pastors, like other Christians, are not immune to the trials and effects of depression and anxiety. It features seven short biographies (including my own) of pastors and church workers

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who have faced or continue to live with mental health issues that have impacted their lives and their ministry. But, more than that, this book exists to equip and help church members and ministers alike to know how to help those who are struggling in this way. It doesn't argue for prescriptive solutions but by looking at multiple experiences it does suggest that there are helpful or unhelpful ways of approaching mental health issues in pastors.

A recent piece of research conducted by LifeWay found that 23% of pastors said they had personally struggled with some kind of mental health illness.³ Although these figures come from the church in the US, they mirror the statistics in the wider population in the UK. In short, they tell us that pastors get depression too, even seriously so. Of course, you don't have to look very far in the Christian press to find such stories.

None of this should come as a surprise. We live in a fallen world where the effects of sin and death are all around us. Regardless of money, status, fame or intellect, people get ill and die. As sinful people living in a sinful world, pastors are not exempt. Few deny that church leaders get sick. When a pastor gets cancer or faces a serious operation, most congregants don't automatically

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assume the pastor is at fault for their illness. We recognise Jesus' teaching that there is no straight line between sin, suffering and illness (John 9:1-3). That doesn't mean sin never leads to illness (cf. John 5:14). The addict who damages themselves through ongoing sinful choice or the person with Munchausen's syndrome pretending to be sick and receiving unnecessary and damaging treatment are both cases in point. But the line between sickness and sin – according to Jesus – is not typically a direct or causal one.

Even if there were a tight link between health and holiness (and, for the avoidance of any doubt, there is not), our pastors are no more holy than any other believer. If we are in Christ, we are perfectly holy (cf. 1 Peter 2:9; Ephesians 1:4, 4:24; 1 John 3:3; 1 Corinthians 3:17). No Christian can be any more holy than they already are and none of us are more holy than any other believer. We all have Jesus' perfect righteousness accredited to our account and the Father looks on us through the prism of His Son's perfection (Romans 5:1-5; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 1:22; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 2:9). That means your pastor – as good a man as he may be – is no more holy than you. They sin just like other people but they are also as holy as everyone else

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who has been made perfectly holy in Christ. They have the same Holy Spirit dwelling in them that every other believer has received too (Romans 8:9, 11; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19; Galatians 4:6; 2 Timothy 1:14). If we recognise that none of these things keep most Christians from suffering the effects of illness, we must accept that pastors will get ill too. Mental health disorders are just one form of illness that has plagued the world since the fall and which affect pastors as much as anybody else.

One pastor who wrote a chapter in this book did not feel able to share his mental health struggles with his church until he read about other ministers who had suffered similar experiences. For some, there is still a stigma associated with mental illness. Others feel a sense of shame and embarrassment. Still others feel they are alone in their experience. This book has been written to assure pastors struggling with depressive illnesses, and churches who recognise that one of their leaders is suffering from a mental health disorder, that they are not alone. These issues are not unique to you. Others suffer with them too and there is no shame in admitting your need for help. Every contributor in this book hopes that this collection of stories makes it clear to both church leaders and their members that depression and anxiety

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respect no person. Pastors suffer from these things as well and they, as much as anybody else, require the care of their churches in tackling these issues.

Of course, it is one thing to know that others are facing similar situations, it is quite another to know what to do about it. In reality, few experiences of depression are exactly the same. There may be common features, but the circumstances are almost always different. That is the second reason this book has been written. Useful as it may be to read one pastor's experience, the multiple viewpoints presented in this book show the range of ways depression might impact ministry and suggests that each individual situation requires its own particular solution.

This book is not only aimed at pastors struggling with depression. It also exists to help churches care well for those who are suffering from mental health illness in ministry. All of the contributors have included examples of things that were particularly helpful to them as well as things that were especially unhelpful. Many well-meaning folks want to help but just don't know how. It is easy to be paralysed by the fear of getting it wrong and then, ultimately, doing nothing. Others want to help but end up saying or doing

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something that makes matters worse. This book is for people who want to help, who want to know what to do, but don't know where to start.

But above all of that, this book wants to help you care well for your church leader. It wants to draw out the things that you can do that would be helpful to any pastor suffering with anxiety or depression, as well as identifying the sort of things that are never helpful but somehow seem to keep being done regardless. From these different stories, the conclusion will pull together the common things that helped everyone, the things that didn't help anyone and those things that were different in each case. This will aid those looking to support a church leader suffering with depression to be sensitive in the help they offer.

In the end, we hope this book helps pastors to have honest conversations with their churches about their mental health struggles and we trust, even in some small way, it serves to take away some of the stigma surrounding depression in ministry. We hope those suffering with depressive illnesses might find healing in its pages as they see their situation is not unique and, though it may not feel like it, others really do know something of what it is like. Most of all, we hope it helps

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churches to support their pastors and church leaders who are struggling in this way. We want it to take away some of the awkwardness of asking for, and offering, help. Likewise, we want this book to highlight the things that are likely to make matters worse and instead encourage us all to aim for what is truly helpful.

Finally, before diving into the stories featured in this book, it's worth outlining a working definition of depression. The NHS helpfully states that 'depression is more than feeling unhappy or fed up for a few days. Most people go through periods of feeling down, but when you're depressed you feel persistently sad for weeks or months.'⁴ To receive a formal diagnosis of depression, at least five out of nine symptoms on the DSM-IV classification system must be present for at least two weeks and, during that period, reach 'sufficient severity' for most of every day. The nine symptoms are:

- Persistent sadness or low mood
- Loss of interests and/or pleasure
- Disturbed sleep
- Decreased or increased appetite and/or weight
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Poor concentration or indecisiveness

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- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate feelings of guilt
- Suicidal thoughts or acts⁵

Mild depression is classified as having few, if any, symptoms in excess of the requisite five needed for diagnosis. Sufferers of mild depression often have minor functional impairment. Moderate depression is where symptoms and functional impairment are between mild and severe. Severe depression is where most, if not all, of the symptoms are present and have a significant impact on function. Severe depression may also come with psychotic symptoms.