

Supporting Pastors & Church Staff

How can churches support pastors and church staff during the pandemic?

Churches are continuing ministry during this pandemic in new ways, often without employees being in the office. Pastors and church staff are no different from other workers in having to find new ways to balance their work and ministry with caring for home and family. Many pastors and church staff have full workloads and normal commitments of home, while now also juggling full-time childcare and virtual learning. Add that to anxiety, uncertainty, isolation, missing parents we cannot visit, missing church friends we cannot see, missing worship, and on and on – and we come to a breaking point where something must give. We do not want that something to be our family relationships, church relationships, work responsibilities, or overall mental health.

Church leaders can play an important role in supporting pastors and church staff. This is an opportunity to show the love of Christ to these servants through our support and encouragement. Compassion and encouragement are even more important in this challenging time. Consider these ideas as you navigate these difficult and uncharted waters with your pastor, church staff, and church leaders.

1. Awareness

Make an effort to learn what demands are on your pastor or church staff.

Church leaders should make sure they spend time considering the additional commitments that may be on pastors or church staff on a day-to-day basis. This is especially true for our Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committee and ministry partners such as the Lay Leader. Does your pastor or staff have school-aged children at home? Are those children learning at home and needing support from their parents during school hours? Does the pastor or staff have other family members they are providing more care to during this time? Is your pastor or staff also trying to be a resource for other families in need during this time?

As church leaders, make sure you are aware of what is going on in the lives of your pastor or staff. This doesn't mean you need to know every detail of their day but be aware in general of the demands (old and new) on your staff. Sometimes it can make a big difference in someone's day just to know that they are seen, and someone cares enough to try to understand what they are going through. It does not mean you can necessarily fix it, but you see it and you understand.

A specific area of concern for church leaders should be how conflicting needs are impacting our female pastors and church staff. Overall **workplace studies** are showing that women are backing out of the workforce an average of two hours per week compared to minutes for men. At first glance, this may not seem like a lot, but it is 5% of a typical workweek and can have **long-term implications** for equity for women in the workplace. While this does not exclude men from our efforts to be aware of new and competing priorities, it does challenge us to increase our awareness of the demands on our female pastors and staff so that we find ways to support needs being shown by industry reports to impact them at higher levels.

**Practical suggestion: Have the S/PRC chairperson reach out to the pastor to find out what challenges the pastor is experiencing under safer-at-home guidelines. If the church has other staff, find out the challenges facing them in their ministry contexts.*

2. Expectations

Adjust expectations based on awareness of how church, family, and other needs might have changed.

No one imagined a year ago when setting ministry plans that we would be where we are right now. As we move through this year, are the plans made a year ago or even earlier this year still feasible? In what ways has the ministry of the church changed and how have our roles and responsibilities changed to make way for new ministry? We have all heard the saying that "clergy are clergy 24 hours a day." While this is true, parents are also parents 24 hours a day and caregivers are often caregivers 24 hours a day. Church leaders can evaluate ministry plans considering the awareness of all demands on a pastor or church staff's time and adjust expectations to

support all areas of the person's life. As an example, what happens if a church has regularly scheduled online Bible study at 10 every Tuesday morning lead by church staff and now suddenly church staff are helping children through online school meetings at that same time? Is it possible to evaluate that meeting and maybe have it at a time that does not conflict with virtual school? Is it possible for others to volunteer to lead certain weeks so that it is not the same staff person trying to figure out the schedule each week?

We cannot control the school schedule, hospital schedule, or many other demands and competing priorities for time for our pastors and staff but we might be able to adjust our expectations. Our expectations for the time of our pastors and staff on the church side might be the one place we can help by offering flexibility in expectations to accommodate conflicting priorities.

**Practical suggestion: Consider ways that expectations we can control might be adjusted to accommodate demands on pastors and staff that we cannot control. Can church meetings or deadlines be adjusted around school or other schedules to still be done but just not at a time that causes conflict for time and attention? When ways are identified, act now instead of waiting for pastor or staff burn-out.*

3. Boundaries and Flexibility

Develop plans to set boundaries and offer flexibility to address changing needs and priorities.

Acknowledging that our pastors are our shepherds caring for the flock in our local churches, our pastors and church staff take that responsibility seriously. The work of the pastor often requires the pastor to care for the needs of others in front of the needs of themselves and their own families. The expectation for full access to pastors can be both life-giving as pastors find themselves providing the love of Christ in the deepest and most vulnerable times in someone's life, and life-draining when competing priorities cannot allow full presence in those moments. Church leaders who are aware of the demands on a pastor or church staff who have considered and maybe adjusted expectations for the person's time can now consider appropriate boundaries and flexibility in schedules to provide some relief in

times of high demand. Should there be a schedule for work times that can be shared so that church members know what expectations are? If the pastor is unavailable at a particular time, who is an alternate contact person? What are acceptable expectations for contacting the pastor during time identified as personal time? “Emergency” can be a subjective term – what are examples church leaders can agree upon to avoid confusion?

**Practical suggestion: If there are times the pastor or staff need to be truly away from the church except for emergencies, find an alternate contact during those times and let church members know. Support the pastor by allowing flexible schedules to help the pastor have time to meet competing demands and honor boundaries set by that schedule. Help the pastor feel comfortable in trusting that the alternate contact will let them know if there is a true emergency so that they can feel free to be truly present with other activities while they are away from the church office.*

4. Support and Encouragement

Offer words and resources to lighten the load of competing demands.

Words matter. Actions matter. Pastors and church staff are people with feelings and emotions just like everyone else. A kind word of support or encouragement can make the difference in levels of job satisfaction, morale, and overall happiness for employees in any industry. Church leaders should consider ways that they can act to support and encourage pastors through their words and actions. Let a pastor know that you see what they are doing and what difference it makes in the life of the church. Tell the pastor that their time with their family is making a difference in the ministry of Christ as they build disciples of Christ in their own homes. Encourage the pastor or staff to honor boundaries and resist the inclination to try to be all things to all people all the time. Let the pastor know it is OK to rest and honor Sabbath time and that doing this not only betters their ministry because they can refocus but also allows others to step in and offer ministry during those times. Above all else, let the pastor or church staff know that they have your support because you are aware of additional demands during this stressful time and you are committed to being someone working to make this time easier however that is possible.

**Practical suggestion: Offer specific ways and resources to support your pastor and church staff during busy or stressful times and not just the general "let me know if I can help." Would a gift card to a local restaurant provide dinner on a busy night? Can meeting schedules be adjusted to accommodate school schedules for parents? Can others offer to jump in to lead a Bible study or make calls to check in on church members to lighten the load on a stressed-out pastor?*

5. Communication

Communicate well and often with pastors and others about competing needs and adaptive ministry plans.

Church leaders should stay in contact with pastors and church staff and keep lines of communication open. Encourage the pastor to let you know when needs change and when time or attention conflicts present themselves. Be ready to hear the concerns and act as appropriate to provide support. Support might be listening (pastors need to process emotions too) or helping come up with a plan to address the conflict. Be open to new ideas for how to accomplish ministry needs and step in as needed to support those ideas. Adopt a model of transparency with church members about ministry schedules, boundaries, and flexibility. If a conflict arises in a church need and a schedule, work to find ways to meet the need while still understanding and honoring boundaries as much as possible. Support your pastor and church staff publicly and in private conversations that might come up about church needs. Help others who might not be aware of competing priorities to understand the need for balance and support in these stressful times.

**Practical suggestion: Work with the pastor to set a regular schedule for checking in on how things are going and any needs or challenges that might have come up since the last check-in. Express support for your pastor during stressful times in public and private conversations.*

In general, employees who feel supported and cared for are more productive and produce better outcomes for the organization in the long term. The way we love others (pastors and church staff included) must reflect Christ's love given so freely to us. Let Christ's love be your guide as you learn about the needs of your pastor and church staff, work with them

to set expectations, and offer support and encouragement. Eventually, school will resume, and lives will get somewhat back to our normal routines. We do not know how long that will take or how long we will be in this new version of normal. We do know, however, that our relationships matter and the ways we care for each other matter. Commit to being the person someone remembers long after this is over who made a difference and helped them get through this tough time. Be the person that makes someone know without a doubt that Christ loves them today and every day because God sent you to be God's hands and feet in such a time as this.