
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Solo Pastoring

Between 60-75% of all churches in the United States are led by a single paid staff member, or a solo pastor. Serving as a solo pastor is a demanding role for a number of reasons. In conversations with solo pastors these come to the top of the pile of comments.

First, solo pastors wear numerous ministry hats. “When I was the solo pastor of a church in western Nebraska,” one pastor wrote, “I was the senior pastor, youth director, VSB director, worship leader, small group coordinator, primary adult Sunday school teacher, men’s group leader, and church grounds keeper. As the senior pastor/shepherd, I was responsible for preaching, counseling, visitation, leading, etc.”

Second, solo pastors rarely get a break. “The weekly weight of preaching can be crazy with extra hospital visits, funerals, community events, etc.,” wrote another pastor from Arizona. “It would be nice once in a while to be able to look to an associate pastor to fill the pulpit for me, but this is not available. No matter the week, every week, I must preach, which almost always is a joy, but sometimes I wish there was an occasional break.”

Third, solo pastors are required to serve in areas of personal weakness. “Being a solo pastor, I have to do a lot of different things in running the church, plenty of which is outside my area of gifting,” wrote a pastor from Maine. “So, church paper work, and other office work pulls me away from study, visiting people, discipling, leadership building.”

Fourth, solo pastors are usually underpaid, with few if any benefits. A solo pastor recently told me he is considered full-time by his church, but he only receives a little over minimum wage. He has no health insurance, retirement funding, or ministry expense account of any kind. Everything his family needs comes out of his own personal account. To compensate, he drives a school bus, and works as a salesman when school is not in session. This bi-vocational lifestyle hurts the entire church by minimizing the full impact he could have in leading the church to make disciples.

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Fifth, solo pastors are envisioned as caretakers and caregivers by the congregation. “People grow frustrated that you have not visited them in their home for a while. In a solo pastor church, people often expect regular pastoral contact, even though others care for them, too.”

Sixth, solo pastors are lonely. “Friendships between pastors and church folks are seldom vocational in nature,” wrote a pastor from the west coast. “Solo pastors must carefully navigate conversations, as talking shop is not naturally understood. Deep discussions about ministry trials and challenges are avoided, since parishioners don’t understand the weight of expectations pastors carry.”

Seventh, solo pastors navigate church politics alone. “Most churches led by a solo pastor are smaller—for a reason. The inner workings of the church (DNA) are well-known by the long-term members and attendees, that is, almost everyone but the solo pastor. As loving and welcoming as the congregation may be, the reality is the pastor is an outsider who is not-in-the-know.”

Eighth, solo pastors lead churches that are resource-poor. “As a solo pastor, finances can be tight. We

recently adopted a Safety Policy and Safety Team to deal with CPR, first aid, active shooters, etc. A larger church would hire and pay for a professional consultant or attorney, but as a solo pastor, I and another layperson set our hand to drafting/writing this policy. It involved hours of time that was not directly shepherding people.”

Ninth, solo pastors deal with the church’s primary influential person, couple, or family, with no support. “My church is strongly influenced by an intergenerational family,” comments one solo pastor from the southeast. “These power brokers are a difficult group to load.”

Tenth, solo pastors struggle being compared with pastors of larger churches. One solo pastor explains: “Everyone has access to the best preachers and church leaders each week via the Internet, television, or podcasts. Comparisons may be unfair, but are inevitable. There was a time when solo pastors were respected and appreciated, but the growing gap between smaller churches and larger ones make solo pastors feel like failures.”

If you are a solo pastor, which of these comments have you personally experienced?

What would you add to the list?

How do you manage these challenges?

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