



***“... but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” Proverbs 18:24***

Someone once told me that 83% of statistics are made up, get it? After reading the introduction to Lance Witt’s book, Replenish: Leading from a Healthy Soul, I certainly hope the statistics are made up but suspect that they probably are not. Witt chronicles the carnage of an untended and neglected soul of a spiritual leader in the position of pastor:

- 1500 pastors leave the ministry permanently each month in America
  - 80% of pastors and 85% of pastor’s spouses feel discouraged in their roles
- 70% do not have a close friend, confidant, or mentor
- Over 50% would leave the ministry if they could but have no other way of making a living
- Over 50% of pastor’s wives feel that their husband’s decision to enter ministry was the most destructive thing ever to happen to their families
- 30% of pastors admitted to engaging in either an ongoing affair or a one-time sexual encounter with a parishioner
- 71% stated they were burned out and battle depression beyond fatigue on a weekly and even a daily basis
- One out of ten will actually retire as a minister

You may wonder along with me, “Is it actually this bad? Was there something that skewed the results of this research?” Clergy retention rates tend to point to similar findings. A Duke University study reports that 85% of seminary graduates will leave the ministry within five years of starting. It is as if they stick their toe in some very frigid water and decide not to take the plunge for the duration of their careers.

I also ran these statistics by an important authority on the matter: my wife. She thought the statistics were probably low!

If the statistics are even remotely true, then what is going wrong in the lives of pastors today? What has created this toxic kind of environment for life in ministry? More importantly, what can we do to safeguard the well-being of the pastors and their families in the Shawnee Valley District?

As I look at the list above, there is one item that pops out immediately that seems like it would be fruit of the low-hanging variety. If 7 out of 10 pastors feel like they have no close friends, confidants, or

mentors, why can we not become close friends to one another? Why are we forced to serve in emotional isolation from one another?

I wonder if Jesus knew something when He sent out His disciples for ministry in the surrounding villages and countryside? Remember, He sent them out like the animals of Noah's ark: two by two. That pattern continued in the Book of Acts as the mother church sent out missionaries to plant churches around the Mediterranean world. **No one went alone.** Not even Paul!

What if ministry could be an example of the abundant life that Jesus said He came to bring? What would happen in our lives, our families, our ministries if we were more fun to be around? If we actually took time to develop close friendships? If we remembered what it was like to laugh really hard with people we cared deeply about and trusted implicitly? What if our best clergy clusters didn't feel like someone else's prescribed program to fix us, or improve us, or give us unwanted or unsolicited advice? What if we were part of a cluster not because an Annual Conference told us we had to, but because that is the gathering of confidential and trusted friends where we can let down our guard, not play the role of pastor, and simply be the person that we are?

Many of our pastors are not able to be part of clusters because of constraints on their time. That is understandable if clustering is simply to fulfill a requirement or to follow through with an obligation. What I have found in my life is that I make time for things that I really enjoy doing. I can be stressed out of my mind all week with not a second to breathe and then watch football on Sunday for 8 or 9 hours straight. We make time for the things we value the most, things we enjoy.

Our practice of meeting together in small groups of pastors is at its best when it feels like a needed break from the heavy demands of ministry, a time to get together with people we enjoy who are committed to walking with us through thick and thin. I envision gatherings that are laughter-filled, encouraging and affirming, truth-telling without fear of judgment, holding one another before God in prayer. I envision gatherings where strong friends come together to love, strengthen, and support one another. Proverbs says that it is possible to have a friend that is closer than a brother. What is holding you back from investing your time in a relationship life that?

Our clusters are listed on the district website along with contact information. Should you desire to start a new cluster, or if you have a question or a concern, please give me a call.

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