

My Dear Fellow Pastors,

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! To the shepherds of God's flock, entrusted with the care and nurture of God's people, I write to you with deep respect and great concern for some of the challenges we are facing together in this season of leading and caring for the Church.

We find ourselves in a time of significant change. As we look at the state of many of our denominations and congregations, we see a troubling trend: a growing number of pastoral burnouts and pastors who have stepped away from ministry. Simply put it, pastors are experiencing tremendous amount of mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual challenges, and they seem to be causing significant number of pastors to step away from congregational ministry. Pastors are struggling with compassion fatigue at unprecedented levels, and the burnout epidemic is becoming a serious problem. Consequently, many pastors have been joining the "Great Resignation" and leaving ministry altogether. According to a poll data (March 2022) collected by Barna Group, a California based research firm that studies faith and culture, about 40% had considered quitting full-time ministry.^[1] Although there are more recent studies claiming that pastors' confidence and security in their calling are rising lately, the burnout and withdrawal from ministry are still concerning.

What is causing pastors to burnout and quit? What are the prominent stressors for pastors? In the same Barna research mentioned previously^[2], the top five reasons for pastors who have considered quitting are reported as follows: the immense stress of the job (56%), feeling lonely and isolated (43%), current political divisions (38%), unhappiness with the effect the role has had on the pastor's family (29%), and the pessimism about the future of the one's church (29%). In other words, we need to do a better job in securing and caring for our pastors' personal health, as well as examine certain systematic challenges within the church that contribute to these reasons. We need to listen carefully to the cries of our struggling pastors and provide some practical resources that will help resolve these prominent stressors.

Frurthermore, we need to reexamine some theological and biblical dimensions that are tied to the problem at hand. The increasing number of pastors quitting ministry has several theological and biblical dimensions that are tied to both personal and systemic challenges within the church. For the remainder of this letter, please allow me to introduce some key theological and biblical issues that need further conversation and cooperation:

1. Calling and Vocation: Many pastors leave because they struggle with the sense of calling that once motivated them. Theologically, the idea of vocation is central to ministry, rooted in the belief that pastors are divinely called to shepherd the flock (Ephesians 4:11). When pastors feel burned out or unsupported, they may question whether they misinterpreted their calling, or whether the church's expectations align with

God's will for their lives. The tension between personal vocation and institutional demands can become a significant theological issue.

2. Sabbath and Rest: Scripture emphasizes the importance of Sabbath rest (Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:8-11). However, many pastors face relentless pressure to be always available, leaving little room for rest or spiritual renewal. The theological issue here involves whether the church is practicing biblical principles of Sabbath by allowing its leaders time for renewal and rest. Ignoring this contributes to pastoral burnout and emotional fatigue.

3. Spiritual Authority and Accountability: The New Testament often speaks about the heavy responsibility of being a spiritual leader (James 3:1). Pastors are expected to be examples of faith and integrity. However, when this responsibility becomes overwhelming, pastors may feel the weight of perfectionism. Additionally, in some churches, there is a lack of effective spiritual accountability, leading to either abusive leadership structures or isolation for pastors.

4. The Problem of Suffering and Evil: Theodicy, or the problem of evil, can be a theological challenge for pastors dealing with overwhelming crises in their congregation or the broader world. Continually witnessing suffering, grief, and brokenness can cause some pastors to struggle with doubt or fatigue in their own faith. This theological tension can lead to burnout if pastors feel helpless or unsupported in addressing these issues, especially when they are facing the constant demand of congregants who want definitive theological and biblical answers to a particular issue.

5. The Role of the Church: Theologically, the church is called to be a community of mutual support, a "body" where all parts work together (1 Corinthians 12). However, many pastors report that they feel isolated or unsupported by their congregations, with unrealistic expectations placed on them. This disconnect between the biblical vision of the church as a supportive community and the lived experience of pastors creates significant stress.

6. Leadership and Servanthood: Pastoral ministry is framed in Scripture as an act of service and humility (Matthew 20:28). However, many pastors face conflicting expectations that require them to be both effective visionary leaders and humble servants. These competing pressures can create a theological tension around the nature of leadership in the church.

7. Resilience and Suffering: There is also a theological issue around the idea of suffering for the sake of the gospel. Some pastors may feel that their struggles are a form of suffering that should be endured, echoing Pauline teachings about perseverance (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). However, there is a fine line between enduring hardship for the gospel and recognizing when a situation is unsustainable or harmful.

Balancing resilience with the need for boundaries is a significant theological and practical challenge.

These theological and biblical issues highlight the need for the church to address both the spiritual and practical support systems for pastors, ensuring they can lead in a healthy, sustainable way. The hope is that theological conversations about God's calling and purpose for pastors in the world today will correspond with practical solutions that will help us to continually assemble as believers in Christ, in and through the church.

As pastors, we cannot face these challenges in isolation. I invite you to join in a collective conversation—a conversation where we can share our experiences, encourage one another, and seek the Spirit's wisdom in charting a path forward. We need to explore creative and sustainable solutions to the concerns of our fellow pastors and churches. These are not easy tasks, but I believe that by coming together, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and holding fast to the truth of Scripture, we can find a way forward. Let us lean on one another and seek wisdom from above as we faithfully lead our congregations through these challenging times. I look forward to hearing your thoughts, sharing in dialogue, and working together to find Christ-centered solutions to these pressing concerns.

Blessings,
John Huh