

# Editorial: Pastoral health requires intentional community

September 13, 2023

What Alexander Lang thought would be [a typical blog post went viral](#) over the last two weeks. In his post, he explained why he left, not just his church, but also the pastorate. His explanation generated important [discussion](#), including [here](#) in the *Baptist Standard*.

Lang left the pastorate, in part, because of the unrelenting pressure and stress of the position. Stress and pressure always have been a feature of the pastorate, but the last few years have intensified them to a breaking point for many pastors.

Intended or not, Lang put a spotlight on pastoral health. While that concern is still on our minds, I want to point to the good work some are doing to improve pastoral health and call us to expand that work.

## Books can be helpful

Authors and publishers increasingly have recognized the need to address pastoral health, and several books on the topic have appeared over the last decade or so.

These include *Preventing Ministry Failure* by Michael Todd Wilson and Brad Hoffman (2007); *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* by Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman and Donald Guthrie (2013); *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* by Peter Scazzero (2015); *The Leader's Journey* by Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor and Robert Creech (2020); and *The Weary Leader's Guide to Burnout* by Sean Nemecek (2023).

Your pastor likely has been recommended at least one book on pastoral health, maybe one of the above. Your pastor probably has read at least one of these recommendations, and probably still feels stressed. Such books are helpful, but they only go so far. Their authors say as much and strongly advocate for intentional community.

## **Community is more helpful**

In recent years, as concern over pastoral health has mounted, several efforts have been launched to address the increase in stress-related illnesses, burnout and ministry failure among pastors.

The Truett Church Network, The Whole Pastor and the Pastor Strong Initiative are examples of these efforts. The strength of each lies in the community each strives to build.

In addition to an array of educational offerings, the [Truett Church Network](#) has hosted weekend pastor retreats where ministers are able to relax, enjoy time with friends and colleagues, and learn together.

[The Whole Pastor](#), a ministry of Bobby Contreras—pastor of Alamo Heights Baptist Church in San Antonio and chair of the Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board—seeks “to connect pastors, families, and communities to a holistic approach and view of health” that includes “spiritual, physical, mental, financial, and relational” aspects.

## **A replicable model of community**

As the shared work of several ministries and organizations, the [Pastor Strong Initiative](#) offers a replicable model of pastoral community.

Pastor Strong is a collaboration of the San Antonio Baptist Association, [Texas Baptists](#), The Whole Pastor, Baptist Health Foundation—who helped

start Pastor Strong with a five-year grant—Baptist Credit Union and [STCH Ministries' Pastor Care](#).

Chad Schapiro, a church starting pastor and mentor to church starters, leads Pastor Strong. He lights up when he describes the ministry, saying he wants to be a Barnabas to pastors.

Pastor Strong currently focuses on senior pastors, though it is open to other ministerial staff. It also is open to pastors and ministers of churches not affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Through regular gatherings over coffee and lunch, two retreats and two date nights a year, and the [Lydia Network](#) for pastor's wives, Pastor Strong seeks to build supportive and encouraging relationships for pastors and their families. The ministry also provides coaching and financial assistance through partner organizations.

Though a new ministry, Doug Diehl, pastor of Crossroads Baptist Church in San Antonio, said Pastor Strong already is fostering greater participation and encouragement between pastors than has been seen in the San Antonio area in many years.

Others have noticed the benefits of Pastor Strong and have asked about its expansion into their areas. Replicating Pastor Strong is possible with collaboration and coordination of resources. In several places, these resources already exist and simply need a coordinator.

## **Not only pastors need community**

Pastors are called to a work few outside of the pastorate understand. My father-in-law was a pastor 45 years and then served as a director of missions 11 years. When my wife was a child, a teacher at school asked what her dad did for a hobby.

“Weddings and funerals,” she responded.

The teacher clarified by asking what he did on weekends and got the same answer.

More than one family vacation or event was cut short when a church member died, and he returned home to minister to the family and prepare for the funeral—so many that we came to expect family time to be cut short.

Anecdotal? Yes. And the tip of the iceberg of a pastor’s—and pastor’s family’s—life.

Loneliness and isolation accompany this 24/7 kind of work, along with a host of other stresses and pressures. The intentional nature of the Truett Church Network, The Whole Pastor and Pastor Strong goes a long way to overcoming them.

More intentional communities can and should be created to meet this need. We also need groups like the Truett Church Network, [The Pastor’s Common](#) and [Texas Baptist Women in Ministry](#) that also provide supportive communities for women in ministry and their families.

Pastors who seem to endure the rigors of ministry well tend to be part of communities like those described above—communities of trust, friendship, encouragement and support. This means we need more of these communities in more places.

Pastors aren’t the only ones who need these communities. Pastoral health—a good all its own—translates to church health. This means creating and supporting these communities and facilitating our pastors’ participation in them is in every church’s interest.

*Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist*

*Standard. He can be reached at [eric.black@baptiststandard.com](mailto:eric.black@baptiststandard.com). The views expressed are those of the author.*