

ALONE (Part one)

“Turn to me and be gracious to me for I am lonely and afflicted.”

Palms. 25:16

Alone! Why do I feel so alone in the leadership of this ministry? With dozens of people around me, I feel separate, isolated and cut off. *What am I supposed to do, Lord? Do I carry this responsibility alone? How do I share the weight of ministry with my team? Is there a problem in my life, or my ministry life, that I am unaware of, or unwilling to address, that is leading to my loneliness?*

This was my prayer on numerous occasions during the eighteen years I served on the pastoral staff as Director of Womens Ministries and Service Ministries. The first ten years I was the only woman on a staff of five men. That fact led to some of the feelings of being alone.

The Lord was bringing steady growth to our church which led to change after change in the methods and goals of ministry. Communicating change to a congregation is never easy; having them accept change in a 60+ year old church is even harder.

As a result of the growth, a variety of new ministries began, and I was in constant training mode of women I didnt know very well. It takes time to build friendships and develop deep levels of trust. Often I felt I could not share my hopes or my frustrations.

Someone once said, “Its lonely at the top,” and there is a certain amount of truth in that statement. Being responsible for the spiritual growth of others, and knowing that final decisions on direction and policy fall to us, gives even the bravest of Christians moments of fear and uncertainty. When the responsibilities of ministry press heavily on us, we can feel alone, overwhelmed and estranged from others.

At times like this it helps to take a few hours to meet with the Lord and do some self-analysis. Too often in life, our internal perspective drives our emotional outlook. The reasons for loneliness in ministry are innumerable, but there are three significant personal reasons that need examination: leadership position, our spiritual life, and personal pain.

The demands of ministry are like small creatures that eat away our ability to understand clearly the path ahead. The following questions are designed to stimulate your thinking and help develop some creative ideas to resolve your loneliness.

How did you become a leader? We find ourselves leading ministries in our churches for various reasons: No one else will do it, so I raised my hand; I was asked, and said yes; I have a vision and passion for this type of ministry; or, for some, I was the only one left to carry on.

How did I become a leader? Perhaps it is time to reassess if I am in the right position as leader.

- Has the Lord called me to this position or did I get there by default?

- Is it time to step down from leadership for a while to attend to pressing personal problems in my life that require attention?
- Is the Lord perhaps moving me to another ministry?

Understanding that the Lord has called you to be the leader is extremely important. Can you identify the factors which led to your decision? It isn't always clear. Often I have wished the Lord would send me a text with direct instructions, "Mary, you are to do...". More often his request begins to clarify as I talk with a pastor, consult with a mature Christian mentor, talk to my husband, pray, and find confirming direction through reading the Bible. If all seems to be in order, then I must step forward in faith believing that the Father will lead me, and provide me with wisdom.

Even mature ministry leaders struggle with their calling from time to time. Joni Eareckson Tada, head of Joni and Friends, a ministry to the disabled, revealed her doubts about leading her ministry in her book, *Holiness in Hidden Places*: "Somehow a sense of doubt had gripped me, like some strange virus. Though I had weathered the privileged demands of ministry for many years, a frontal assault on the assurance of my calling was underway."

Like Joni, I remember twice sitting beside the Columbia river asking the Lord to reconfirm my leadership because the stress of ministry had dissolved my confidence in my calling. Perhaps it is time to reassess and reconfirm your position.

There are beginnings and endings to leadership. Life happens to all of us. It is better for the life of the church if we can leave a ministry before we are forced to by the circumstances of our lives. A burned-out leader is painful for everyone. If you sense that God wants you to leave, then prepare to do so. Often a new leader will not step up or be found until the present leader resigns.

However, if confirming circumstances reveal that God wants you to remain as the leader then it is time to reevaluate an area Satan loves to attack: your private spiritual life.

The leaders ever -growing spiritual life. The emphasis we place on spending time with the Lord seeking his understanding and direction for life and ministry is key to strong leadership. What is your regular routine for Bible study, prayer and worship? Has anything changed your routine? List all the demands placed upon you by others, or yourself, and consider what to eliminate so you have time to return to, or build on, your relationship with Christ who loves you so much.

Joni Eareckson Tada, as mentioned above, tells of the lesson she learned when doubts of her calling assailed her: "I was learning something important: we are most vulnerable to the piercing winds of doubt when we distance ourselves from the mission and the fellowship to which Christ has called us. Our night of discouragement will seem endless, our task impossible, unless we recognize that He stands in our midst." An ever-growing spiritual life builds resilience into our lives.

King David led armies and a nation and maintained a close relationship with the Lord the Maker of Heaven and Earth. As he wrote Ps. 119, he gave insights into the abundant life leaders seek. Verse 2 says the one who seeks him with all their heart will be blessed. Verse 9 states that our life can be kept pure by living according to the Word. Verse 76 is a promise that God's unfailing love will be our comfort. Ps. 119:130 states "...the unfolding of your Words give light; it gives understanding to the simple."

Four scriptures promise us blessings, righteousness, comfort and understanding. What is available in the other 31,098 verses in the Bible?

Little of lasting value takes place in our personal or ministry lives without dependence upon the wisdom, strength and guidance of God. Loneliness may stem from a lack of a vibrant personal relationship with our Savior. Ministry erodes away the precious time we spend with Jesus. If this has happened to you, please return to your first loves: Jesus, the Word, and prayer, and let joy return to your soul. Then watch the changes that will come to your inner spirit and your outward ministry.

Our calling can be firm and our spiritual life be satisfactory yet our heart be in pain. Dealing with a constant stream of negative people or situations can bring loneliness as we stand resolute in faith.

What level of personal emotional pain are you dealing with at this time? The church at large has an enemy that constantly bombards ministry with problems. His goal is to bring negativity, dysfunction and practical problems galore. The leader who isn't trained to "put on the whole armor of God," Eph. 6:11-18, and lean heavily on Christ will eventually become frustrated, angry and demoralized. If you have not studied how to appropriate God's armor, please do so. Your pastor can give you resources that align with your denominations teaching on spiritual warfare: Bible studies, books, websites.

It helps greatly to define points of pain. Can you identify three current ministry problems? Write them down in detail. Putting a problem into words can lead to insights and solutions. Be honest in your assessment. Be sure to examine your emotions/feelings concerning the problem. Unexamined feelings can sneak up and pop out when we deal with congregants or staff. Then we have added a problem to our problem. Just as marriage requires two good forgivers, so does ministry. Rarely is a people problem one sided.

I learned many problems arise from a lack of understanding the church's method of ministry, the reasons behind decisions made in ministry, or general ignorance of Biblical principles of ministry. Clear explanations given gently and softly can solve a multitude of issues.

If you are a staff member, be sure to notify your leaders of ministry changes before they hear via the gossip line. For major changes in ministry direction, invite your pastor or administrative pastor to give explanations. Your leaders can communicate with their teams saving you from countless explanations, and keep rumors to a minimum. Just make sure your leaders clearly understand the reasoning behind changes so they give accurate statements. It's helpful to use a feed/feedback method. You feed them the information, and they feed back what they heard you say. Any misunderstandings or broader explanations can be given at that time.

More questions to ask yourself about emotional pain:

- Who on the team is difficult to work with?
- Has someone criticized your ministry or yourself?
- Has someone sullied your reputation?
- Is your church in the midst of a crisis or struggling?
- Has the administration of your church made changes that are not being received well?
- What home problems are you experiencing?

What is the pain in your heart and belly telling you? "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7) is easy to say, but sometimes extremely hard to do. Even when we do place our fears

and struggles in Gods arms, our bodies can miss the message and react in pain. Physical pain is the alarm bell warning us to resolve issues to the best of our ability.

Women often process their problems by talking, so developing a trusted friend in whom you can confide is important. Is someone on staff able to help? Have you cultivated a mature Christian friend who is not a part of your congregation in whom you can confide? I was fortunate to have a Christian friend in another town who had a similar type position in a secular field. When the pressure became too great, and I couldnt talk to anyone in the church, I would call her. It wasnt unusual for her to drive to see me. She listened and brought objectivity when I was lost in the problem. I will ever be grateful for her love and service to me.

Is it time for you to seek counsel from a Christian therapist? Tragic things are handled in ministry: infant/child deaths, suicides, murders, physical threats, sexual assaults, terrorism and a host of other problems. As a layperson or a staff person we dont always have the training to know what to say or do. I had been on staff three weeks when a call came in from a suicidal person. There were no other pastors at the church that afternoon, and I had no clue what to do or say. Fortunately for me, she only wanted to speak to the Senior pastor, so I was spared from a counseling situation I was unprepared to handle.

As we walk through and help carry the pain of others, we are often left with questions of our own. *“How could you let this happen, Lord? Why this senseless unspeakable act? Did I say/do that which brought comfort? How on earth do I handle this problem?”* Keeping a list of local professional counselors and their specialty will give you immediate resources. Then cultivate a relationship with one of them so you can express your personal feelings in a safe place.

Family problems complicate our ministry lives also. Its so easy to bring our emotions from home and inject them into our office life. Try this idea to help separate the two. As you leave your car to enter the church, tell the Lord your leaving your home problems on the passenger seat. Mentally place the whole mess there, and walk away. God is perfectly capable of taking care of those we love. Your ministry needs a clear mind and heart in order to deal with other peoples problems.

Emotional pain, personal or from ministry, builds up in ones life and will bring loneliness and even estrangement in ministry. Please reach out and find a trustworthy person, or counselor, to help carry your load through prayer, listening and caring.

My prayer for those of you in leadership positions is this: Father God, the one who guides and directs the kingdoms of the world yet knows when a sparrow falls, reach into the hearts of the readers today and relieve their loneliness with your presence. Bring to mind anything that is causing unnecessary pain. Cover the pain with your love and give understanding. Lead each one in the direction you desire. Reveal your will through your Word. Give rest where needed, renewal of commitment to following Christ wherever he leads, and creativity for the future. I praise you for the changes you are bringing in the days ahead. To God be the glory. Amen

Dear reader: This article, (Part One), deals with the internal assessment of loneliness in leadership. There are **external pressures** that can distance us from others and bring feelings of isolation. **Part Two explores Spiritual Warfare, Team Administration, Essential Rest, and the Cost of Ministry.** Join us next week.

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Mary loves to help women turn biblical knowledge into practical application for their everyday life. She has a heart for leaders and loves to mentor them.

Mary is married to Doug. In retirement they enjoy traveling across the United States and Canada. They have three children, nine grandchildren and four great grand children. She loves to read, sew and teach.

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