

Church Leader, I want to share a conversation I had with a pastor about his journey through depression.

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Leadership Network *Advance*



Q&A: One Pastor's Journey Through Depression

By Ron Edmondson, CEO

In our last LN Advance, we addressed a very important issue - the mental health of the pastor. I believe this is a critical issue for every church to consider. One of my convictions in this new position is we must consider more than how to grow the church or develop leadership in the church. We must help churches and church leaders be healthy or all our work is to no avail.

I have been overwhelmed with responses from church leaders as a result of the article. One pastor who reached out shared some of his story and I felt an interview was appropriate. I will let Blake Jennings introduce himself.

1. Blake, tell us a little about your church and ministry.

I serve as a Teaching Pastor at Grace Bible Church in College Station, TX, a multi-campus church strategically focused on reaching students from Texas A&M and Blinn. Ten years ago, I and a team of staff and volunteers planted our second campus, Southwood, where I continue to preach and teach.

2. After the last LN Advance, you shared some of your story with me. Thank you for being vulnerable with your church, me, and now with our Leadership Network of churches and ministry leaders. Could you start by telling us a little about your experience of depression and how it impacted you and your church?

I was the kind of kid who grew up singing "I've got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy" every week in Sunday School. And it was generally true, until five years ago when an overpowering depression entered my life. Ironically, it was at a time of great professional success: Southwood was bursting at the seams. But on the inside I was dying. Prolonged stress at work and home (twins are HARD!), struggles with religious doubt over the theology of hell, and a sense of career stagnation (Southwood was full-grown, so now what?) combined to extinguish any sense of hope or joy.

Fortunately, I was not alone in this battle. Close friends and family helped me get the counseling and medical help I needed, and generous leadership at our church gave me the space and job changes I needed to find some relief. While the struggle is not over, I am markedly better. That improvement inspired me to share my story publicly at all three of our campuses this last year so that those living under the crushing weight of mental illness would know that they are not alone, and that there is no shame in this battle.

3. When did you realize you had to get help? What were the triggers or warning signs?

Six months passed between the onset of depressive symptoms and my first conversation with a counselor, and another year passed before we finally realized it was serious enough to require medicine. So, I may not be the best at identifying the early warning signs! It is so difficult to distinguish between discouragement and depression, or to determine the severity of one's depression. Looking back, there were two significant changes that kicked me to the next level of treatment. First, insomnia became regular. I've always struggled periodically with sleeplessness, but the frequency and intensity grew as the causes behind my depression intensified. Second, I began to shut down in group settings. My inability to interact at a friend's birthday proved the last straw before seeking medical help.

4. Did people around you recognize it before you did? How did they respond? Did they know how?

Yes and no. I was the one who noticed the first warning sign: growing insomnia. That motivated me to talk to a counselor, for there's few things I fear more than losing my ability to sleep! But it was a close friend (actually, my boss) who caught the second warning sign. He was at the party and noticed how much I struggled to carry on even the most basic levels of human interaction. He drove to my house the next day to simply say, "Blake, you are depressed, and it's time to get help." I set up a doctor's appointment that afternoon and was immediately put on antidepressants.

5. What would you say to church staff, family members, or friends who have someone in their life they believe is struggling with severe depression - or even someone who might be suicidal?

I would distinguish between these two scenarios. Realistic risk of suicide requires an immediate, all-hands-on-deck response. Don't hesitate to bring in a doctor or a police officer. Go to where the person lives and do not leave until he or she has professional help. If you don't know how to determine whether suicidal talk constitutes a realistic risk, get help from those who do. Professional counselors are an incredible asset here, and all church staff should be trained in the basics of how to respond to this all-too-common scenario.

Severe depression is also serious, but does not require such an immediate, overwhelming response. First and foremost, encourage the person to (1) seek professional Christian counseling and (2) talk to his or her primary care physician, who would probably be the

person to prescribe any needed medications. Be aware that some people will struggle with this advice out of an incorrect, but common, belief that anxiety and depression are just sins that must be rooted out through greater repentance, prayer, and scripture rather than through modern medicine or counseling. Yes, sinful thoughts are sometimes part of the cause of a mental illness, just as sinful behaviors are sometimes the cause of a physical illness. But that is not always the case, and it does not rule out the need for counseling and medical treatment to complement spiritual treatment. I hope we can put to death the stigma in so many churches regarding the use of counseling and psychotropic medications. Speaking with a counselor or doctor about our mental health is a sign of godly humility and wisdom, not an admission of failure! Feel free to share my story if it helps your friend or staff member get past the shame and guilt that, unfortunately, so often accompany these struggles.

6. What helped you the most? How did you fight through this season?

I truly have no idea what step helped most; and I think the question might betray a false conception of mental health. One step is not more important than another. We must treat both the material and immaterial aspects of our humanity to find healing. That requires spiritual steps such as prayer, scripture, accountability, fellowship, confession, and service. It requires medical and physiological steps such as speaking with counselors and doctors, adjusting diet, exercise, sleep, and prescribing psychotropic medications where appropriate. And it requires practical steps such as adjusting job responsibilities, reducing stressors, and finding a hobby (building and racing cars, in my case). All work together to help the whole person improve.

7. You were bold in approaching this in your church, and even did a sermon series called Mental Health and the Follower of Christ. We will share that series with our readers, but are there any other resources you recommend?

Tommy Nelson and Steve Leavitt's, "Walking on Water When You Feel Like You're Drowning" proved very beneficial. My experience is not identical to Tommy's, but there's much we share in common.

I highly recommend becoming friends with Christian counselors! Our church staff has been blessed to know and learn from many in our own community. We've invited them to come train us from time to time, and have always walked away with excellent resources.

8. In closing, where are you today? How are things going?

I am definitely better than I was at my worst, four years ago, right before getting on an antidepressant. But I am not healed, and I don't know if it's realistic to think that I will be this side of heaven. Like the diabetic who must treat his condition for the rest of his life, I may be treating my depression in one way or another for the rest of mine. I am mostly at peace with that reality, however. Everyone has a cross to carry. Perhaps this is mine. While I do, my continual prayer is that not only may God sustain me, but may He use this thorn in my side to bless the many in our pews silently suffering their own mental health battles, too ashamed to share it with those who could help. Perhaps my story can inspire

them to believe there is no shame and no guilt in this struggle. If so, it will have been worth the pain.

Blake, thank you for your honesty and vulnerability. We continue to pray for you, your church, and all our churches. Please connect with me on social media if we aren't already. I'm easy to find on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. If Leadership Network can help you or your church, please let us know how we may serve you.

Resource Links

Blake's Sermon Series:

[Finding Hope in the Midst of Loneliness and Loss](#)

[Finding Hope in the Midst of Depression \(my story of battling clinical depression\)](#)

[Finding Hope in the Midst of Anxiety \(my wife's story of battling an anxiety disorder\)](#)

[Finding Hope in the Midst of Addiction](#)

Support Providers:

[Pastor Support Network](#)

[Grace Alliance](#)

Leadership Network Leader Groups:

[NextGen Pastors](#)

[NextLevel Pastors](#)

[Executive Pastors](#)

Other Resources:

[10 Questions to Assess the Health of a Leader](#)

Compensation Report Question: Why Is the Total Income of Larger Churches Growing So Much?

By Dave Travis, Senior Consultant

We had a good question come in responding to our current report: *7 Vital Benchmarks in Church Compensation – Findings from the Large Church Salary, Staff and Benefits Survey.*

This pastor has followed all of our work diligently since 2008. And he had at his fingertips our past reports and was comparing the total income levels of the churches in those

reports.

He couldn't believe that the income had grown so much since the 2010 report. He reported that his own church had almost doubled in size but not doubled in income. Plus the levels we reported were not near his own levels.

So what is going on? A few directional thoughts.

First, it is well established over the past 15 years in our work at Leadership Network that one clear thing helps increase the discipleship of a congregation in the area of generosity.

The primary factor is a clear, systemic plan to holistically teach, preach and engage congregants in this vital discipleship area. We repeatedly talk about this through all our generosity initiatives.

Second, I would commend him to remember 2010! 2010 was the beginning of the comeback of the economy, but still pretty stark. So that would have been "lower than usual."

Third, we have dramatically increased the number of responding churches. In other words, **we get better coverage and data than we used to.** We have over 1000 churches that engage in the survey with many more responses that we refine to remove duplicates from congregations.

Fourth, since the recession, more churches are responsibly educating their people on giving and generosity. They are developing new tools to disciple and nurture people in that way.

The last recession was a real wake-up call in this area for churches.

Recently I was in the middle of a succession conversation with a church. They bragged to me: "We never talk about money here, we don't take an offering. We have a box in the back labeled tithes and offerings and our members know what to do. We have never had a money problem."

What they really meant was "we always have enough to pay our bills."

But when I looked at their giving levels and compensation levels of their team, especially as they gear up for new leadership, I showed them how low their giving was compared to comparable churches. In addition, I think they were neglecting to disciple people in this area.

Fifth, the growth of "automatic giving" usually through automated electronic means, has shifted some churches dramatically. More churches are emphasizing this area now and getting core attenders to give in this manner. When its automatic it adds up!

Sixth, I did look at his community demographics. Sometimes a church can grow well in a

more economically depressed place. An auto plant leaves, the spinning mill closed, etc. Attendance can grow when finances don't sometimes.

Seventh - in general - budgets and giving go up when consumer confidence (basically a person's view of their own economic future) is rising, AND the mood and confidence in the church is rising.

Finally, this leader compared himself across the broad range of churches not ones right in their churches range. He was reading the free report. To get a better sense he would need to look at our tables and tailored reports to get the clearest data for their size range.

I hope you will check out all of our Compensation report offerings on our salary page. Simply click or tap on the banner below.



Things You Want to Know About

Opportunities and resources for you and your team

New Article and Resource: Should Full-Time Staff Take Outside Work to Gain Income?

The question came from one of our clients: **What policies do churches put in place for staff wanting to take on “extra jobs?”** After reviewing the current policies of client churches and curating thoughts from numerous conversations over the years with lead and executive pastors, Brent Dolfo and Dave Travis have collaborated on a new article and resource that will be released soon.

We wanted our *Advance* subscribers to hear about it first.

What the Resource Will Cover

In addition to a simple process for church leaders to follow that will help formulate a policy for their staff members, this resource covers the following:

- A brief review of the historical context of paid staff
- Three basic stances on outside work
- Three broad types of outside work
- Three common principles to consider

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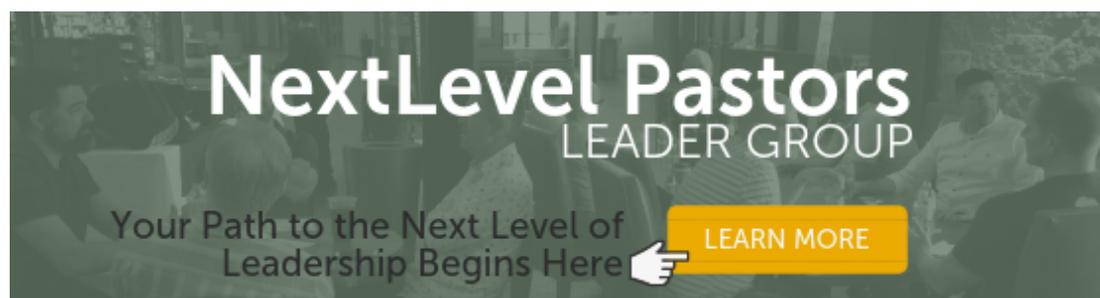
NextLevel Pastors Leader Group: You Are Invited

Are you looking for a group of peers and mentors that understand the challenges of large church leadership and who can help you achieve the next level of leadership and church growth? If so, apply for a spot in our inaugural **NextLevel Pastors** group led by our CEO, Ron Edmondson.

As a participant in our NextLevel Pastors Leader Group, you will:

- Meet together 3 times during a one-year period. Each meeting spans three days plus travel time. Additional calls will take place between gatherings.
- Develop personal and ministry goals. Your peers will hold you accountable to your goals and so will we.
- Receive coaching and mentoring on the personal and organizational challenges you are facing in your ministry.

Participation is limited to the first 15 qualified participants. To learn more about the group and our interview and selection process, click or tap on the banner below.



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