

# Loving Your Minister through Prayer and Accountability

“CRAIG,” THE MINISTER SAID, “you are a man who walks with God. I trust your wisdom, maturity, and integrity. I know you listen to the Lord. Would you be willing to find five other people who have the same heart and gather them together for me? I’d like to meet with you every six weeks for prayer, accountability, and feedback on my ministry and personal development.”

For more than a year, the minister has met with his ad-hoc team of men and women. Their affirmation, searching questions, and honest, gentle appraisal keep him from veering into workaholic patterns, help him remain responsible and growing in his primary relationships, and hold him close to God. Thanks to their support and prayers, he evaluates new ministry programs and commitments in light of his gifts, calling, and family priorities.

## Not Always the Case

I met Quinn after he moved to his new church in a small Texas town. When asked about the most stressful time in ministry, he said, “Right now. I moved into the midst of a church split. Mediation is not my gift. Our family of nine crowds into a three bedroom parsonage. My wife and son quit their jobs to come here.”

“Where can you go for help, Quinn?”

“Nowhere. Not to the elders, not to the board, not to a local counselor, not to a colleague, and not to a peer.”

I begged him to get counseling in some other town, to find someone to listen, to pray, to guide.

A month later, his mother-in-law phoned. Quinn had a massive heart attack in the grocery store. He died on the spot. His wife and seven children were left without home, income, and a husband and father to shepherd them through life.

## Life or Death

Prayer and accountability are life or death issues for both the minister and the church. Statistics report the average length of ministry today at 2.3 years. Losing a minister, whether by forced termination, mutual consent, or a new church call, often stunts a church’s growth, giving, attendance, and outreach.

Ministers often suffer from such brief ministries

as well, missing out on opportunities to fulfill their potential and to be supported by prayer and affirmation.

## Prayer

How do we pray for our ministers? Are we prying into their personal lives when we ask for prayer requests? Why would ministers share their needs with people in their congregation?

People in ministry have the same needs as everyone else. They need time with God, the Holy Spirit’s empowerment in their work, protection and discernment in their relationships, direction with finances, and wisdom in their daily choices. They need friendship, encouragement, and prayer. If it’s an issue or a need for you, it probably is for your minister—so pray for your minister as you would want people praying for you.

Our church makes a room available every Sunday morning before our worship services where we can go to pray for our minister, staff, worshippers, and those involved in the service.

One man meets with his minister weekly for prayer. A group of elders and their minister share confidential requests for prayer and uphold one another daily before God.

Prayer fine-tunes the hearts of those who pray, softening them to God’s love and enhancing their relationship with their minister. As this support and encouragement increase, the people of God grow in their love for one another, as well as for their minister.

## Accountability

Praying is one thing; inviting ourselves into our ministers’ lives, prying into their needs, daring to hold them accountable, is another. This is a job for the humble, loving, spiritually mature members of the church.

Ministers wrestle with the same needs, temptations, problems, and battles the congregation faces. Sadly, though, they often wrestle alone. Like Quinn, most ministers have no confidant, no support group, no safe place to share their burdens in ministry or in family life.

Isolation and stress can lead ministers into temptation. Studies show the divorce rate for ministers is no different than the divorce rate of the general public. I

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often hear of ministers who become involved in affairs, or who destroy their ministry and family because of sexual misconduct or addictive behavior. Dr. Archibald Hart warns that pornography is the top problem for those in ministry today because it is instantly accessible (via the Internet) and easily hidden.

Accountability is not criticism. Rather, it is a gentle coming alongside of our ministers, getting to know and care about them, and asking, "How can we help you be all that God desires for you, in ministry and in your personal life?" It requires strict confidentiality.

"Appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and . . . esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13 *NASB*). When trust is earned and appreciation is clear, ministers are more willing to be held accountable.

How do we help ministers in the highly personal areas of life and ministry?

By prayer. By loving friendship. And then by daring to ask, as John Wesley put it, "How is it with your soul?" Say, "Phil, I thank God for bringing you to us. You carry tremendous responsibility. I want to support you and help you to grow. I want you to take care of yourself. How can I help you in your marriage, family life, spiritual life, or ministry?" It would be far better to feel uncomfortable and still ask, than to leave your minister open to burnout and tragedy because no one cares.

Another way to provide accountability is to establish professional guidelines for your minister.

- Provide a detailed job description, with reasonable work hours, that fits your the minister's gifts and strengths. Overwork is not a badge of godliness; it's an open invitation to problems.

- Because pastoral counseling

creates intimacy, suggest a maximum number of times the minister may counsel someone. Some experts suggest three. After that, refer.

- Some ministers insist on office doors with windows. Others leave the door open a few inches.
- Many ministers counsel only with couples, or meet with a safe third party when counseling members of the opposite sex.

- Encourage your minister to take a calling partner along when visiting in homes.

- When meeting with staff or church members, always meet in an open area with others around; or insist on a trio to reduce temptation.

Ministers and members must account for their own lives before God, and for their interactions in the lives of others. An accountability tool for ministers and elders might include: *Setting priorities.* Consider such areas as: work, marriage, children, spiritual life, friendship, and health.

*Establishing objectives.* Some objectives may be: "I will work within my gifts and calling," or "I will keep my work week to 50 hours," or "I will honor my marriage by spending quality time with my mate."

- *Set goals for each objective.* Perhaps, "I will keep track of work hours," or "I will not say yes to commitments without praying and evaluating them according to my gifts and priorities," or "I will schedule a date each week with my wife."
- *Clarify.* Ask your minister, "How do you want us to hold you accountable?" "What would that look like?"

- *Ask.* "How do you want us to say, 'This is out of balance, or outside the boundaries you established?'"

- *Pray.* Pray daily for each other in these areas.

- *Praise God.* Praise him for his work in each member of the group, including your minister.

When a circle of prayer, support, grace, and accountability surrounds a minister, new life enters the church and the world. ❀

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