

PASTORS IN PAIN

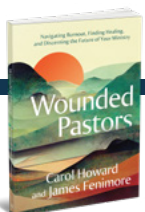
Should You Stay or Should You Go?

A PERSONAL INVENTORY FOR PASTORS INSPIRED BY *WOUNDED PASTORS*

The question of whether to stay or to leave pastoral ministry can be incredibly complex. We must pay attention to our emotions, but we can't let them dominate the decision-making process. Our conclusion needs to be well thought out and not reactionary. We might have an overwhelming urge to flee, but we need to take some time to reflect on our situation with a clear understanding that leaving doesn't always solve a problem.

In order to renew or release, we can take an honest inventory of some important questions. The following pages present some of these questions along with space to journal your responses. You can type in the box fields if you prefer using the computer, or print this out and journal by hand if that is your preference.

Learn more about discerning your future, how to set appropriate boundaries, navigating church power dynamics, and more in *Wounded Pastors: Navigating Burnout, Finding Healing, and Discerning the Future of Your Ministry*, by Carol Howard and James Fenimore.



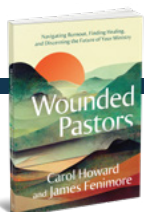
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Are you able to care for yourself?

Are you harming yourself or thinking about doing so? If you are actively planning on harming yourself, then please call a professional immediately. If that self-harm has roots in your job, then figure out an exit strategy. There is no calling that is worth your life.

Don't neglect the drawn-out harm you can do to your body. Often pastors engage in a slow and steady self-destruction through different habits—working too much, eating too much, eating too little, drinking too much, or engaging in harmful drug use. If you feel like your church is killing you softly, then please leave the relationship.



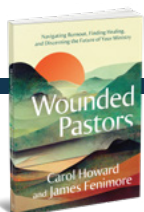
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Are you standing alone?

When toxic people try to take over a church, the congregation needs a strong line of defense. If someone attacks you and a group of courageous people stand up to the bully, then you know that the health of the system will allow you to get through the ordeal.

However, if someone regularly pounces on you and the congregation works hard to placate the bully in order to maintain the status quo, then you might be better off going someplace else.

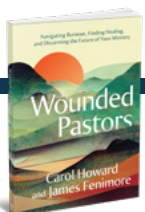


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Is your family hurting?

Do members of the church put pressure on your family to perform or act in certain ways? Does stress from the job leave you feeling so out of control that you take it out on your family members? Does your church put pressure on you to choose the church over your family? Your family members aren't responsible for keeping various ministries populated. If the church is harming your family in some way, then pay attention.

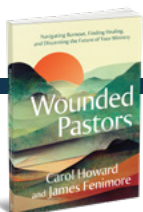


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Is your family flourishing?

On the flip side, don't take your family's happiness for granted. You might have an amenable child who makes friends easily and seems to root and blossom each time you move. But that doesn't mean you can uproot her during her senior year of high school without some long-term damage. Likewise, maybe your spouse is climbing the corporate ladder or just earned tenure. It might feel like success will follow your family, no matter where your job leads them. But that is not always the case.



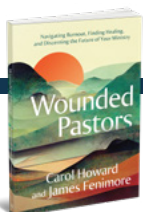
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What is your financial situation?

Assess the short-term and long-term financial risks of leaving. Does your family rely on your income or benefits? Could you get a job somewhere else if you needed to? If you leave your job, could you work out a severance package? Would it be better for your career (and long-term financial position) to stick it out and find a position on your own terms? What about your living situation? Would you have to leave a parsonage? Do you have money to buy or rent a house?

Sometimes pastors have a “God will provide” attitude about new jobs. They don’t worry about the money as long as they feel called to the place. And while things often work out in the end, there is significant suffering during the transition and it’s beneficial to pay more attention to the financial situation.



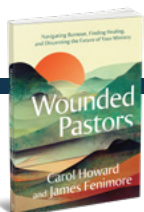
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Are you called to the church?

Think back to why you began at the church. Do you still dream of all the possibilities ahead of you? Are there small coincidences and signs that indicate you are supposed to stay? How do you feel in your gut when you pray about being there?

Of course, this question can be a tricky one. Even if you feel like you have a strong connection with God, discernment can be difficult. You might like people, even when they don't treat you particularly well. There might be a tiny part of you that thinks you should be suffering for Jesus. As baffling as the discernment process can be, it's important to keep praying and asking the question.



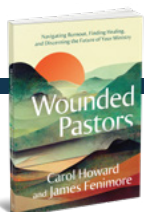
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Do you feel any passion for the ministry?

Do you dread Sunday mornings? After taking time off, do you feel even more drained at the prospect of returning to work? Do you find that you no longer have joy for those things that you used to love, like baptisms, preaching, or liturgy?

That is not to say that every day must brim with meaning—there will be seasons that feel dry as dust. However, if it feels like more than a season and you're beginning to feel like you're stranded in a desert without a drop of water, then you might want to consider if God is calling you elsewhere.

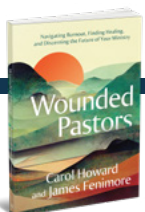


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Are you able to be yourself?

Do you have to hide major parts of your personality or identity to stay at your position? We're not talking about dress codes or cursing, but things like your sexual orientation, ethnicity, or creative expression. Is there something that feels essential to who you are that the church is pressuring you to give up?



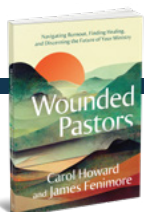
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Are you trying to use external changes to solve internal problems?

We can get into a pattern of leaving a church when we're depressed or anxious because we think that our problems will be solved when we move to a new call. We feel sure that our issues will dissolve, only to find out that the same frustrations seem to follow us.

If you find the same problems popping up each place that you go and moving does not help, then you might be looking for external solutions for internal problems. In these circumstances, seeing a counselor and doing some internal work is a beneficial approach.



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