



CHRISTIANITY TODAY

## PASTORS

DISCIPLESHIP

### **I Was a Pastor's Wife. Suicide Made Me a Pastor's Widow.**

What I learned about mental health and ministry following my husband's tragic death.

**KAYLA STOECKLEIN**



Image: Courtesy of Kayla Stoecklein

I was 19 when I met Andrew and quickly fell in love. He was a pastor's kid who felt called to ministry, and it didn't take long for me to realize that life with him meant life as a pastor's wife.

I grew up attending church every Sunday, but wasn't until I spent time with Andrew's family that I caught a glimpse of what life was like in the trenches of ministry. As I leaned in, listened, and learned, I saw that although serving in ministry can be meaningful and beautiful behind the scenes, it can also be stressful, disappointing, discouraging, and lonely.

In 2015, Andrew became the lead pastor of his parents' church, and I quickly found ways to fill my new role as lead pastor's wife. I served on the women's ministry team, set up for the MOPS group on Wednesdays, and arrived on time for the very first service every single Sunday.

Ministry was everything. Our entire world revolved around the local church and the calling God had placed on Andrew's life. His calling became my calling; his passion, my passion; his purpose, my purpose

Then on August 25, 2018, after battling through a season of burnout, depression, and anxiety, my beloved husband Andrew tragically died by suicide.

Life as I knew it changed forever and I was handed a brand-new life as a widow and single mom to our three young boys. All of a sudden ours was the sad story on the internet. I watched as images of my life and pictures of my family made headlines all around the world. We were thrust into the spotlight in an instant.

While the world was watching, leaning in, listening close, I chose to speak. I wouldn't let suicide get the last word. Just three days after he went home to heaven, I wrote him a letter and posted it to our family blog. "Your name will live on in a powerful way," I [pledged](#). "Your story has the power to save lives, change lives, and transform the way the Church supports pastors."

It was through that letter I first began to see God's hand at work, redeeming what was lost and even saving lives from suicide. We received hundreds of letters, gifts, donations, books, blankets, and bouquets from complete strangers. The love was loud.

What I noticed early on and what I've learned these last few years is that Andrew's story isn't uncommon. This week marks National Suicide Prevention Awareness Week, and sadly, year after year the American church loses more of its leaders to suicide.

Many pastors and people serving in ministry positions struggle with their mental health. And sadly, they don't always feel like there is space for them to share their struggles with their peers or congregants. Fear of losing their job, fear of losing their platform, fear of losing their voice, fear of losing respect from their peers is all a very real reality. From my experience with Andrew, I've learned how important it is for the church to set up leaders to respond when they inevitably find themselves in a season of ministry fatigue.

Every pastor needs a safe circle of people with whom they can be vulnerable. They need close friends and a trusted community where they can let their guard down, take off their pastor hat, and just be themselves. Andrew would often say, "It's lonely at the top," but it doesn't have to be. We were never created to do life alone; it doesn't work.

Related to this loneliness is a heavy burden of responsibility. Andrew would often refer to himself as the "linchpin," the person holding everything together. I would constantly, lovingly, point him back to Jesus and remind him who the linchpin really was. When serving in a ministry position it is crucial to carry the mantle of leadership as a team. If we don't allow others to share the burden with us, we will crumble under the pressure of it all.

The burden feels especially all-consuming when the demands of ministry seem relentless. It took years as pastor for Andrew to find even one day a week to rest. If we don't create margin for rest, we will be running on empty. We have to be intentional about turning off our phone, logging off our e-mail, or staying away from our computer for the day. Rest is the key to success.

The truth I've found through my former role as a pastor's wife is that pastors are people too. They aren't superhuman; they are human. They aren't invincible; they are just broken vessels giving it their best shot to be a bright light in a really dark and desperate world. But to keep shining bright and leading from a place of strength, pastors must be deliberate about how they care for themselves too. Pastors need community, they need to share the heavy weight of the mantle, and they need to give themselves permission and margin to heal and rest.

For leaders who have pledged to the church and to God to serve no matter the cost, it can be hard—or even unthinkable—to say the personal cost has become too high. But the truth is, your life and your health are more important than your ministry. If your ministry is killing you, if it's destroying your family, if it's exacerbating your depression, it is time to tell somebody and take a break.

Again, this is hard for any of us to do, but it's particularly hard for those who see themselves as fulfilling a lifelong, all-encompassing call to sacrificial leadership. But in leading like Christ, our pastors need not lead as Christ. The ultimate sacrifice has been made for us. Pastors should be free to share their pain and struggles, knowing they were never meant to carry them on their own.

*Kayla Stoecklein is an advocate for those confronting mental illness and the mom of three young boys. Join her at [kaylastoecklein.com](http://kaylastoecklein.com) and on Instagram [@kaylasteck](https://www.instagram.com/kaylasteck). Her first book, [Fear Gone Wild](#), was published this week.*

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