

Getting Help

Dear Dan,

If I've learned anything in my twenty years of pastoral ministry, it's that I sometimes need help. Wait a minute. Let me rephrase that. I need help all the time. In fact, hardly a day goes by when I don't need some type of assistance.

I'll be honest, though. Asking for help isn't something that comes naturally to most of us in pastoral ministry. Personally, I would rather try and fail before admitting that I need another's advice or support.

But when I don't ask for the help that I need, I get myself into trouble. You see, none of us have all the skills, gifts and wisdom needed for ministry, let alone for daily living. So, by all means, *learn to get the help you need*. Find a way to get past your stubborn self-reliance or whatever holds you back. Seek guidance in whatever area it is needed.

More particularly Dan, pursue the support that's needed in three critical areas of life.

Getting help in our relationship with God. A pastor's relationship with God is *the* most important key to his or her effectiveness in ministry. Very few relationships are rock-solid all the time. Most relationships, even the best of them, need help occasionally. Our relationship with God is no different. If there's a problem, we need help. The question is, where does a pastor turn?

In Eugene Peterson's wonderful book, *Working the Angles*, he revealed that his early years in pastoral ministry led him to the conclusion that he needed someone with whom he could talk openly and honestly about spiritual matters. Not his spouse; not his governing board; not his handball partner; but someone who would listen and from time to time ask the right questions. I believe he is right on target.

Like Peterson, many of us have found accountability to a spiritual leader quite beneficial. This spiritual director is someone who knows how to ask us the all-important question: *Where is God right now in this thing*—whatever it is that you are going through? So ask God to introduce you to a spiritual guide and friend, someone who will ask you the hard questions.

Getting help in our marriage relationship. Not all pastors are married, but many of us are. The health of our marriages, I have come to see, is critically important in the effectiveness of our ministries. When my wife and I are out of sync, my service suffers.

A while back, my wife and I sought help to work through some tough issues in our own marriage. Unexpectedly, we later found ourselves able to encourage others who were struggling in similar areas. We could say, *Look, it works. We're happier now than we've ever been. We got the help we needed. It wasn't easy. Those first few meetings with our therapist were as hard as anything we had ever done, but today we know we did the right thing. Would you like the name of the person we saw?*

Be smart. Choose a person with the right credentials, as you would choose any other professional. But do it. Get the help you need, and then make the wonderful discovery that your vulnerability and willingness to get help can even be the occasion for healing in the marriages of others.

Getting help in our relationship with the church. I am always surprised by how few of my friends in ministry ever ask for help with their churches. Very few pastors I know ever think to ask someone outside the church for help with a tough problem. With so many resources to choose from, it sometimes boggles my mind that so many pastors choose to suffer alone.

First, we can seek assistance from specific colleagues we deeply respect. My experience is that most pastors welcome calls from their colleagues and are genuinely eager to offer their wisdom and caring concern. I have called pastors at larger churches than mine, not really expecting to get through to them, only to find warm and caring voices at the other end, asking how they could be of help.

Secondly, I have also turned to former seminary professors. The further away I get from my graduation date, the fewer faculty members I seem to know, but often there is someone there ready, willing, and eager to talk. One time I called a professor and he surprised me by inviting me to come over *that same day* to talk things over.

Third, we can participate in a ministry support group. When I first came to my present congregation, I called a local pastoral-counseling center and asked if they had a clergy support group. They did, and I joined. For several years I attended their meetings every week and genuinely looked forward to our time

together. They listened to me, I listened to them, and together we felt encouraged in our ministries. I'm a strong believer that pastors need to find groups of peers—outside their own staff—for friendship, honest sharing and support.

Is there anything else I could add about getting help? Sure. There are far more possibilities than I have mentioned here. I guess my bottom line advice is to be creative. If one source of help doesn't work, try another. Be like the *persistent widow* in Jesus' parable and God will hear you.

Your Friend,

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*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find;
knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives;
he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*

Matthew 7:7-8