

WOUNDED LEADERSHIP MINISTRIES

A Companion for the Journey

Your Story Matters

A Guide for the Wounded Pastor



“He comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort others.”

2 CORINTHIANS 1:4

DR. MATTHEW TANNER

FOUNDER, WOUNDED LEADERSHIP MINISTRIES

WOUNDED LEADERSHIP MINISTRIES

Your Story Matters

A Guide for the Wounded Leader

A companion for telling your story, finding your voice, and stepping into healing

DR. MATTHEW TANNER · FOUNDER, WOUNDED LEADERSHIP MINISTRIES
4605 W Ely St, Hannibal MO 63401 · 573-600-0726 · thewoundedpastor@gmail.com

You did not come here by accident. Something happened in the ministry you gave your life to — something that changed you. Maybe you were forced out of a church you loved. Maybe the very people you shepherded became the source of your deepest wound. Maybe you are still sitting in the ashes, wondering if God has forgotten you.

This guide belongs to you. It was built for you — from the real stories of pastors who walked this same road and lived to talk about it. You are not alone. And your story, even the painful parts, has the power to bring life to someone else.

Your story can be one of redemption and hope. This guide can be a catalyst for healing.

“He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others.

When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.”

— 2 Corinthians 1:4 (NLT)

Contents

1. You Are the Survivor — Not the Victim	2
2. Stories from the Wounded — What Others Have Faced	3
3. Telling Your Story Well — Principles and Guardrails	5
4. Story Workshop — Building Your Narrative	6
5. Your Healing Journey — Understanding the Road You Are On	8
6. What to Do Next — You Don’t Have to Do This Alone	9

SECTION 1 · FOUNDATION

You Are the Survivor — Not the Victim

There is a temptation, when you have been deeply wounded, to see yourself as the casualty of someone else's story. The power-hungry deacon. The divisive elder board. The congregation that turned on you. It is easy to let those people occupy the center of your story.

But that is not your story. **Your story is one of a person called by God, tested in the fire, and refined toward something greater.** Dr. Matthew Tanner, who founded Wounded Leadership after his own forced termination, describes this transformation through the image of smelting metal — the heat is necessary, and what remains is stronger and more pure.

Dr. Tanner's Story

I begin my story with the third time I was wounded in the ministry. You heard it right; I have been hurt by the church and the ministry three times. I guess that is why I am so passionate about Wounded Leadership and helping other pastors heal. I know what it is to fight with your calling, your love for the church, and even telling the Lord, "I will do anything but ministry again."

I started to feel the call of ministry sometime in the middle of college, but I fought it wanting to pursue my dream of being in the fire service. I had a plan for my life, and I was sticking to it. I landed, what I thought was my dream job after college, but quickly found out that it was anything but a dream. I quit that job and started working at a cattle farm just to pay the bills since I had recently gotten married. It was at that time that God clearly spoke to me the truth in 2 Timothy 2:15, that I was to study to show myself approved, so my wife and I loaded up a moving truck and headed to Kansas City. It was through the seminary process that the call was directed into the pastorate. I loved to teach, I loved the study and the atmosphere of academics, and I was excited to learn how to lead a church. I was not completely naive because my dad was a pastor, now retired, and he had "warned me" of the dangers of ministry. Yet I was called and I forged ahead.

The first few assignments in ministry had their challenges, like a head deacon asking me if I was putting out résumés and strongly encouraged me to do so at my first church. An administrative assistant misusing the association credit card which led to an intense battle and my leaving the association. I tried to heal from those experiences in my own way, rested in an interim role for a bit in between, and like I said before, forged ahead.

Then came the call to THE church. The search committee said all the right things about how they wanted to grow, reach the community, be salt and light, and all those things. I showed up on the field ready to get to work determining that this time it would be different. I was going to be successful at building this church. About six months into the assignment, the Jezebel of the church overheard me telling another church member about a passage in Isaiah that can be a bit difficult to unpack. She asked what we were talking about and I, again naively thinking everyone wants to know the deep things of the Word of God, told her of our conversation. In her mind I was immediately deemed a heretic and the battle began. This started a war against me for the next almost two years. Every Sunday a group of the congregation would make a point to stand and leave after the song service as I was getting up to preach. Deacons would get in my face and tell me, "You need to figure out how things are done around here boy!" I even brought in an outside

mediator to help figure things out between the deacons and myself, and after an hour of being ran through the ringer, the mediator looked at me and said, “well, you are screwed.”

The worse moment came when one of the deacons started some rumors about my family and my marriage. I, and everyone around me, knew that it was categorically false, but the deacon didn't care. He wanted to do damage and he had succeeded.

Even then, I remember sitting in the office at the parsonage asking the Lord if I should stay and fight or walk away. After reading about Paul in Acts and after the people slandered and reviled him, he shook out his robe and left, I knew I was released from the assignment. But the damage had been done. To say I was wounded would be an understatement. I was angry at the deacons, angry at the mediator that didn't help, angry at the silent ones who stood by and did nothing to fight this madness. I was grieving at the fact that another ministry had ended in utter defeat and failure. Even though I did everything I could to mediate the problems nothing changed the outcome. I even sat down with Jezebel and tried to reach an agreement on the issue, seeking forgiveness and closure on the passage that was so controversial to her. Yet it still ended with a business meeting, where half of the crowd attending, I had never seen at the church before but were still members somehow, roasted me and ultimately accepted my forced resignation.

I then moved my family in with my parents, which was a huge blessing as I look back on it, but at the time was not the easiest time to walk through. I could not explain the sense of failure, grief, and intense sadness I felt. I went to work in the hospitality business in Branson, Missouri not knowing what I would do next, but pastoring was not on the radar anymore for me.

The other thing I forgot to mention is that I had started a Doctorate in this last church, and I knew that at least I wanted to complete it. The project: Unjustified Termination and Forced Resignation of Pastors — which would later birth Wounded Leadership and all that it has become today. I lived in my story of wounding as well as the stories of 30 other pastors and church leaders. I did not think I would ever go back into ministry again, but at least I would find a way to help myself and others heal from this phenomenon.

I didn't know it, but I had one more battle to walk through.

I can remember when a friend of mine, a director of missions in a neighboring association, called me and asked me if I was interested in pastoring a small church near him. The problem was this church was in the same association that had wounded me years earlier. I rejected the offer multiple times but after some persuasion I agreed to be an interim for them. The vote for me to be the interim was unanimous. One year later, after much growth and some revitalization they voted me in as pastor, again unanimously.

In short, through the revitalization, the Lord gave the church the same vision they had rejected 20 years earlier. Without going into too much detail, it was to reject a certain “golden calf,” trust the Lord's guidance, and build something that would be an outreach to the community. The atmosphere of the church changed almost overnight. Posturing for leadership positions began. Business meetings and deacons' meetings became pointed and stressful. The battle was in full force.

The catalyst for “the end” was the matriarch's daughter who divorced her husband. I asked her to step down and seek counseling, to which she refused. I then took it to the deacons and asked them to begin the process of discipline to call this sister to repentance and to seek restoration of her family. I was told that she would be able to do what she wanted and remain in her leadership positions in the church. My leadership was gone at that point. I could no longer lead this church to revitalize. I then went to a deacon, who I thought I could trust, and let him know that I would teach and preach, pastor to the best of my ability, all while looking for a different position. I asked for confidentiality in this process due to the other difficulties my family were walking through at this point. He agreed to that, or so I thought. This conversation was on a Thursday and the next

Sunday in deacons' meeting, the same deacon started the meeting by asking me to tell the rest of the deacons what I had told him the Thursday before. To make a long story short I was out by the next month, with only 2 months' severance and two weeks to vacate the parsonage.

The "other" issues my family were facing was a serious brain tumor surgery for my wife and a major heart issue for my youngest daughter. While I was simply seeking to keep my head above water the church was meeting secretly and planning how they could "get me out."

My emotions at this time were all over the map! I had failed as a pastor yet again. I had written a book on the phenomenon of unjustified termination and forced resignation of pastors, yet it happened to me again. The Wounded Pastor book was picked up by Acclaim Press just before all the events described above took place. I was beyond angry at the church for neglecting my wife and children during one of the most difficult times in our lives together. I remember telling most anyone who would hear that I would never pastor again. I was done with the ministry and done with the church. I questioned whether or not I was ever called to the ministry at all or did I miss something along the way. I grieved the support that my family needed and missed out on while we were wondering what the new normal was going to be for all of us.

The turning point for me in this story was the state convention paying for some professional counseling, where I spent almost a year unpacking the hurt, the grief, the anger, the PTSD, the anxiety, all the feelings that come with such an experience. It was through this part of the journey that I learned how to truly forgive those who have hurt me. I learned how to manage the triggers and mediate the anxiety. Slowly, I began to heal. I was able to find a church to simply attend, sitting in the back row just listening. It took me awhile to be able to sing the worship songs and to start to feel again.

I will never forget during this time that God brought a verse back into my mind and heart that had been lurking in my life since after the hurt from the association. Philippians 4:6–9. It is through this verse and God taking me through a healing process that He called me into a counseling ministry and Wounded Leadership Ministries was born. I now have a counseling ministry working with all kinds of individuals who are hurting in their own ways. Wounded Leadership is now a nonprofit ministry that is seeking to find other hurting leaders, help them embrace their story, and start a path toward healing. Thus, the story guide you have in front of you now! I get to sit with healing leaders as they tell their stories of wounds and paths to healing. As one pastor wrote to me and said, "I have found avenues of healing that I didn't know was possible."

My wounds have become my ministry! I am no longer ashamed of them! God is using them to help pave the way for many others to heal and I pray that as you are reading this, you become one of the healing ones as well. It has truly been a refining fire that has made me stronger!

Don't be afraid or ashamed of your story. I have only given a brief telling of my greater story, but I wanted it to be an example of how to walk through this guide and how to find the path to healing. As you follow this guide, the goal is for you to write as much as you need to in order to begin your healing journey.

It starts with your story! Embrace it! Share it! And heal!

Your fellow Wounded Leader,

Dr. Matthew Tanner

In the language of story, a hero is not someone who never suffers. A hero is someone who is *changed* by their suffering — who moves from wounds to wisdom, from isolation to community, from silence to voice. Before you tell your story to anyone, you need to locate yourself in it — not as a casualty, but as the person whose story God is still writing.

“Imagine the play of your life. God is the star of the show. Your calling is to be faithful to the part He has written for you — even when you are waiting in the wings.”

— Dr. Matthew Tanner, Wounded Leadership

Foundational Questions to Sit With

- If God is the author of your whole life — including this wound — what chapter do you believe you are in right now?
- Who are the people in your story who, despite the pain, pointed you toward something better?
- How has this wound made you more qualified to understand about the people you will serve in the future?

Note: *If you are still struggling with your story or finding it difficult to wrestle with these foundational questions, you may not be ready to share or process your story. If so, that is ok. Please see page 13 — **A Word About Safety and Readiness** — and reach out to someone to walk with you.*

SECTION 2 · YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Stories from the Wounded — What Others Have Faced

The Wounded Leadership: Stories from the Wounded podcast exists because Dr. Tanner knew that the most powerful medicine for an isolated pastor is the sound of another pastor saying: “That happened to me too.” Below are the story-types that recur throughout the podcast. Each includes a lesson and a telling prompt to help you find yourself in the story.

The Forced Termination

MOST COMMON WOUND · AFFECTS TENS OF THOUSANDS ANNUALLY

“I had given that church twelve years. I built it from sixty people to six hundred. Then one elder called a meeting I wasn’t invited to, and within a week I was escorted out of my own office.”

What this story teaches: The suddenness of a forced exit creates a particular kind of trauma — shame, disorientation, and the collapse of identity. Pastors who share this story often discover that naming the injustice clearly (without weaponizing it) is the first act of healing. Your story has a before and after. Both parts matter.

Telling prompt: *“Before the termination, I believed... Afterward, I had to learn...”*

The Long Siege — Slow Erosion by a Powerful Few

CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT · LEADERSHIP TRAUMA

“It wasn’t one big moment. It was a thousand small ones. A year of rumors, undermining, the silent treatment from the deacons. I started to believe I was the problem.”

What this story teaches: Slow, systemic wounding is harder to name because it feels diffused. Pastors who have lived this often discover that the most important part of their story is the moment they finally recognized what was happening — not what was done to them, but when they stopped accepting the false narrative about themselves.

Telling prompt: *“The moment I stopped believing I deserved this was when...”*

The Wilderness — After the Exit

ISOLATION · ECONOMIC HARDSHIP · SPIRITUAL CRISIS

“Nobody called. Nobody checked. I had preached at their weddings and funerals. I sat with them in the ICU. And then I was gone and they were silent.”

What this story teaches: The wilderness season — isolation, economic struggle, spiritual disorientation — is perhaps the most universal experience of the wounded leader. Dr. Tanner’s healing strategy begins with recognizing that healing is multi-dimensional: economic, emotional, spiritual, and in leadership identity. Your wilderness story is not the end. It is the formation ground.

Telling prompt: *“In the wilderness, I lost... and I unexpectedly found...”*

The Identity Crisis — “Am I Still a Pastor?”

CALLING · IDENTITY · VOCATION

“I had been a pastor for twenty-two years. Without that title, I didn’t know who I was. I felt like I was standing outside the temple looking in.”

What this story teaches: When ministry IS your identity, losing the position feels like losing yourself. The story of reclaiming identity is one of the most powerful pastoral stories — because it is the story of learning that God’s call is not the same as a church’s employment.

Telling prompt: *“I confused my role with my calling. The difference I now understand is...”*

The Return — Stepping Back into Ministry

RESTORATION · RESILIENCE · RENEWED CALLING

“I didn’t think I would ever preach again. And now I am pastoring a small church in a small town, and I love every single Sunday in ways I never did before.”

What this story teaches: This is the story every wounded pastor most needs to hear — that there is life on the other side. If this is where you are, your story is a gift to those who are still in the wilderness. Your job is not to minimize the pain that came before. Your job is to be honest that the pain had a purpose.

Telling prompt: *“What I know now that I could not have known before the wound is...”*

SECTION 3 · YOUR VOICE

Telling Your Story Well — Principles and Guardrails

Telling a hard story well is a craft. Done poorly, a wound story can harm others, harm you, re-traumatize your family, or be weaponized in ways you did not intend. Done well, it can set a fellow pastor free. Here are the five principles that shape every story shared in the Wounded Leadership community.

1. Honesty Without Weaponizing

- Tell what happened as factually and calmly as you are able. You do not need to exaggerate — the truth is already powerful.
- Use general descriptors rather than names of individuals. “An elder” rather than a specific name protects you legally and honors reconciliation.
- Ask yourself: “Am I telling this to serve others, or to settle a score?”

2. Owning Your Own Part — With Grace

- Very few pastoral wounds are entirely one-sided. What can you honestly acknowledge about your own contribution — not to take blame, but to tell a true story?
- This is not self-condemnation. It is maturity. Audiences sense it and trust it.
- Dr. Tanner models this in his own telling — he does not present himself as flawless, and it makes his story profoundly more credible.

3. Making the Wound Specific, the Healing Universal

- The specific details of your wound give your story power. Generalities lose people.
- But your response — the grace you found, the truth you held onto — should connect to something every listener can claim for themselves.
- The goal: “This pastor’s story is different from mine — but what they discovered, I can discover too.”

4. Including God as a Character in Your Story

- This is not a trauma story. It is a faith story that includes trauma. Where was God in the wound? Where did you find God on the other side?
- Be honest if that answer is complicated. “I did not feel God’s presence for two years...” is a powerful story.
- The listener needs to know that God can be found in the wilderness — and your story is the evidence.

5. Ending With an Open Hand, Not a Closed Fist

- Your story should end not with a verdict about the people who wounded you, but with what you are now holding out to others.
- This does not require forgiveness to be complete or fully understood — but it requires that your posture be one of offering, not accusation.
- The question to end with: “Because of what I walked through, I now have something to give. What is it?”

SECTION 4 · YOUR WORK

Story Workshop — Building Your Narrative

Work through these steps at your own pace. These pages are yours alone until you choose to share them. There is no deadline — only the next honest step.

Step 1 — Name the Wound Clearly

WHAT HAPPENED? (BE SPECIFIC — WRITE IT DOWN, EVEN THE PAINFUL PARTS.)

WHEN AND WHERE WERE YOU WHEN YOU KNEW SOMETHING HAD BROKEN?

WHAT DID YOU LOSE? (TITLE, INCOME, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, CONFIDENCE, FAITH...)

Step 2 — Locate the Turning Points

THE MOMENT I STOPPED BELIEVING THE LIES OTHERS TOLD ABOUT ME WAS...

THE PERSON (OR MOMENT) THAT KEPT ME FROM WALKING AWAY FROM GOD / MINISTRY WAS...

THE SCRIPTURE, PRAYER, OR WORD FROM GOD THAT ANCHORED ME IN MY WORST SEASON WAS...

Step 3 — Discover What You Now Know

WHAT DO I NOW UNDERSTAND ABOUT PASTORAL MINISTRY THAT I COULD NOT HAVE UNDERSTOOD WITHOUT THIS WOUND?

WHAT DO I NOW UNDERSTAND ABOUT GOD THAT I COULD NOT HAVE UNDERSTOOD BEFORE?

WHAT DO I NOW WANT TO SAY TO A PASTOR WHO IS IN THEIR FIRST WEEK AFTER BEING FORCED OUT?

Step 4 — Draft Your Story in Three Parts

Every story shared in the Wounded Leadership community follows — consciously or not — a three-part movement. Use this as your template for a 5–10-minute verbal story, a written testimony, or a podcast submission.

Part One: The Life Before — Who You Were and What You Built

- How did you arrive in ministry? What was your calling? What did you love about it?
- What was the church or ministry that became the site of your wound? What did you love about it before things changed?
- This section builds the stakes. Your listener needs to feel what was at risk.

Part Two: The Wound — What Happened and What It Cost

- Describe the wound with honesty and specificity — what happened, when, the key moments.
- Include the interior cost: the shame, the doubt, the grief, the isolation. Let your listener feel it with you.
- This is the longest and most vulnerable part. Do not rush it. Do not minimize it. But do not dwell in it — it leads somewhere.

Part Three: The Turning — What God Did and What You Now Hold

- When did things begin to shift? What did God do — directly, through community, through Scripture, through unexpected kindness?
- What are you carrying now that you did not carry before? What is your ministry, your calling, your posture today?
- End with a word directly to the wounded pastor who is listening. What do you want them to know?

SECTION 5 · THE PATH FORWARD

Your Healing Journey — Understanding the Road You Are On

Dr. Tanner's research and personal experience identify six recognizable seasons in the journey of a wounded pastor. You may be in the early stages or near the end. You may cycle back. That is normal. Knowing which stage you are in helps you tell your story from an honest place — neither minimizing your pain nor staying stuck in it.

- 1 The Wound — Impact and Shock**
The sudden loss, the betrayal, the forced exit. Characterized by shock, shame, confusion, and in many cases, PTSD-level responses. You may not be ready to tell your story publicly yet. Right now, the task is survival and safety — finding one trusted person to speak honestly with is the most important step.
- 2 The Battle of the Mind — Lies vs. Truth**
The most dangerous season. Isolation breeds false narratives: I deserved this. God abandoned me. I am not fit for ministry. Your story-telling work here is private: journaling, counseling, identifying the lies and replacing them with truth. This is the foundation everything else is built on.
- 3 Sitting in the Ashes — Lament and Grief**
This stage is not a weakness. It is biblical. Job sat in ashes. Jeremiah wept. The Psalms are full of honest grief. Storytelling in this season is for you alone — writing letters you will never send, speaking your grief honestly to God, allowing the loss to be real before asking what comes next.
- 4 Rest — Receiving Rather Than Giving**
Pastors are givers by formation. Learning to receive care — from community, from counseling, from simply resting in God's presence — is a radical act. In this stage, your story is still largely private. This is not yet the season for public testimony.
- 5 Reorientation — Rebuilding Identity and Calling**
The wound begins to become wisdom. You start to understand who you are apart from a title or a congregation's approval. This is when your story starts to take shape as a narrative with meaning. You may be ready to begin sharing carefully with other trusted wounded pastors.
- 6 Redemption — The Story Becomes a Gift**
You are ready to share your story in a way that serves others. Not to relive the trauma, not to indict your accusers, but to offer a lamp to someone who is still in the dark. This is the season for the podcast, for testimony, for mentoring another wounded pastor. Your story, finally told well, becomes a ministry all its own.

A Word About Safety and Readiness

Before sharing your story publicly, ask yourself honestly:

- Can I tell this story without re-traumatizing me or my family?
- Have I processed the anger enough that telling it serves others rather than re-litigating grievances?
- Is there a trusted counselor or pastor who has heard this story and confirmed I am ready?
- Can I tell this story and protect others — including members of my former congregation who are innocent?

If you are uncertain, reach out to Dr. Tanner's team at thewoundedpastor@gmail.com or call 573-600-0726. You do not have to decide alone.

SECTION 6 · YOUR NEXT STEP

What to Do Next — You Don't Have to Do This Alone

Wounded Leadership Ministries exists to walk alongside you. Whether you are in the earliest stages of your wound or preparing to share your story with others, there is a pathway for you.

If you are in the acute wound stage:

- Reach out for biblical counseling. Dr. Tanner's Center for Biblical Counseling offers both in-person and telehealth options: 573-600-0726 or thewoundedpastor@gmail.com
- You do not need to have your story figured out. You just need to not be alone.
- Find a trusted mentor to share your story with or to help you walk through this guide.
- Listen to the podcast not to prepare to tell your story, but simply to hear the voices of people who understand what you are carrying.

If you are in the healing and reorientation stage:

- Work through the Story Workshop in Section 5 of this guide, preferably with a counselor or trusted friend who can help you process as you write.
- Consider joining The Pastor's Compass, the online community for wounded pastors.
- Begin reading *The Wounded Pastor* by Dr. Tanner for a structured framework for your healing and re-entry.

If you are ready to share your story publicly:

- Visit woundedleadership.com/tell-your-story to submit your story and indicate if you would like it considered for the podcast.
- Before submitting, complete the three-part draft in Step 4 of the Story Workshop.
- Remember: telling your story publicly is not the goal of your healing. However, helping others through your story is a possible gift that comes from your healing.

"With God's help and a bit of hard work, the wounded pastor can experience healing and vibrant ministry again."

— The Wounded Pastor, Dr. Matthew Tanner

Resources from Wounded Leadership Ministries

- woundedleadership.com — Home Base for Healing
- woundedleadership.com/tell-your-story — Submit to the Podcast
- woundedleadership.com/biblical-counseling — In Person & Telehealth
- Wounded Leadership: Stories from the Wounded — Listen on Spotify
- The Wounded Pastor — Book by Dr. Matthew Tanner

A final word: You were entrusted with the care of souls. In your wounding, you became someone who knows — not academically, but in your bones — what it costs to be broken. That knowledge is not a disqualification. In the hands of God, it is the very thing that makes you most useful.

Your story is not over. It is still being written.

And the Author is good.

*"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted;
he rescues those whose spirits are crushed."
— Psalm 34:18 (NLT)*

"© [2026] Wounded Leadership Ministries. All rights reserved. No part of this material may be used, reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of Wounded Leadership Ministries, founded and directed by Dr. Matthew Tanner."