



The Calmest Brain in the Room:
A Conversation on Faith and Mental Health
October 14, 2026

Mark Ramsey: Hi everybody. This is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative, along with my colleagues, Jennifer Watley Maxell and Beth Daniel. We're here with Kyle Bender, who has been around our network in lots of different guises through the years. Kyle, hello, and tell us a little bit about what you're doing now, and, kind of, your vocational journey over the last several years.

Kyle Bender: Sure, of course. Happy to be here. I'm Kyle Bender. I'm a licensed marriage and family therapist. I was in vocational ministry for about 20 years before I made the switch. And then therapy doesn't quite scratch all the itches for me. I'm also a coach for men and do a few other things.

Jennifer Watley Maxell: So Kyle, can you just tell us a little bit about what made you decide to make that switch from vocational ministry to therapy? I'm assuming that there are some skill sets and things that are easily transferable, but that's a pretty big decision to leave pastoral ministry, vocational ministry. And I'm sure there are some people in our network who are contemplating those type of transitions as we speak.

Kyle: Sure. Yeah. For me, it was always on the radar, counseling. I always thought I was going to go to grad school for some form of marriage and family therapy, or just professional counseling in general. So it was always on the radar. But when I got into ministry, I just kept loving the job I was in, and was trying to actually have a foot in both worlds. For me, it's a way of being pastoral without being a pastor. But I once met with a coach. He said, "You know, everything you're describing sounds like you want to be a pastor."

And I said, "Well, here's the five reasons I don't think I want to be a pastor."

And he said, "Those are the five reasons I'm not a pastor anymore, so I'm not going to talk you into it."

This is a form of, sort of, pastoral without being a pastor. But it was a big decision. I wrestled with it forever. I took the full seven years to do grad school, and they were basically like, "If you don't start actually practicing, you're going to have to take all your schooling over again." So I finally made the jump and left ministry.

Beth Daniel: I love that you mentioned the overlap, Kyle, between pastoring and working in ministry, and what you're doing now. I am wondering what you're seeing at the intersection of mental health and wholeness and faith right now. When we talk to people in our network, when we've asked, "What is the one thing that is really difficult?" — particularly post-pandemic — for pastors to handle, they always mention mental health and well-being. And I'm just wondering what you're seeing right now as those two worlds intersect in your work.

Kyle: Yeah. Since I heard this quote in 2019, I've been using it in almost any presentation I give, any talk, anywhere: "We may be living at a time where the world is changing at a rate faster than the human's ability to adapt to that change." There's always been rate of change in the world, and as human beings, our ability to adapt to that change at different times has been stretched in different ways. But it does

feel like we are living in a time where that gap between our ability to adapt to change and the rate of change in the world is pretty significant.

So I often say, “Well, of course you’re feeling anxiety, of course you’re feeling stressed, of course you’re shutting down because every day there’s this invitation to adapt to some change that you’re not quite fully ready to adapt to. And it impacts so many different areas of your life.” From faith formation or your mental health, this is a stretch. This is a challenge right now where we all find ourselves. And I think that’s a good baseline to kind of say.

And then I approach everything through the lens of the nervous system. As I’ve studied more and more of the nervous system, it’s just pretty easy to see how it’s kind of playing out in all of our lives. And it certainly has an impact on our faith formation, because when you’re in the different parts of your nervous system where you’re feeling — the common word you hear today is — triggered or activated; when you’re in those spaces, that’s going to affect how you’re behaving, and all that stuff is affected by what you’ve been through in the past. And so all this comes to play as you’re just living life in a world that is stretching you, that is challenging, that’s hard to, kind of, manage right now.

Jennifer: Kyle, I really resonate with this quote, particularly as a pastor myself who finds myself, often toggling between trying to manage my own anxiety, fears, and realizing that, when people come to church, they’re not looking for someone to amplify their own anxieties and all of that, but they are bringing their anxieties and fears and all of that. So what are some things that pastors can do, both for themselves, and also in community, that can, kind of, help us to navigate that landscape?

Kyle: Yeah. One is just kind of understanding that you’re a human. This is a very natural human response. And what I mean by that is not just like a, “Yeah, you’re human.” No, like, this is baked into your nervous system. So your downstairs brain is your automatic functions, regulates your breathing, but it’s also the place where it’s, kind of, your threat detection system. It’s got your fight, flight, freeze response. And then your upstairs brain folds over the top of all that. It’s got your wisdom, your rational thinking, your empathy, your compassion, all those kinds of stuff. And your brain is literally wired to where, when the lower part of our brain perceives a threat, it starts to turn off the top part of the brain, and it takes over. And so, when we perceive a threat, we “flip our lid”, and we literally turn off the top part of our brain, and the lower part of our brain takes over. Well, that’s where you’re in your defensive state, you’re in your protective state.

When your brain is integrated, you’re connective and grounded, and you feel whole and you feel resilient and resourceful. The more you feel that level of threat, the more you’re going to operate in this lower brain, which is more protective, less grounded, less resourceful, less resilient. On one level, this is baked into your neurobiology so much so that that lower part of your brain is scanning your environment four to five times a second asking, “Am I safe? Am I safe? Am I safe?” And it’s not just, “Am I safe?” It’s, “Is this okay with me or not okay with me? Do I think I can handle this, or do I not think I can handle this?”

And I can imagine in leading a church, anything like that, you’re going to feel those moments where you’re like, “This isn’t okay with me. I don’t know if I can handle this.”

Your congregation’s walking in going, “I don’t know if the world around me is okay. I don’t know if I can handle this.” So we’re all, kind of, in that lower brain state probably more often than not, if that quote is true. And so, yeah, finding some moments to breathe together, communal singing, all the things that

church naturally does, is regulating to the nervous system: being with people, feeling that sense of belonging.

But in general, if you can just view through the lens of “this is wired into us, this is what we are going to do naturally, so of course I feel that way, and of course my congregation feels that way. Of course, this is what’s going on me, and of course that’s what’s happening in them.” And from there, leading from that place, I think, can shift some things for you.

Mark: Kyle, in pastoral leadership — and a lot of our listeners are pastoral leaders — how can we help pastoral leaders to understand this, not just for themselves, but for the congregation, without dropping into what I call “excessive, self-absorbed self-care”?

Self-care is good. I was with a group of pastors last week in pretty challenging circumstances, rural areas, and almost to a person, we spent the entire time, as I went around and said, “What’s your biggest challenge?” It was all about their own care and well-being. How can we rebalance this in a way that’s generative and healthy?

Kyle: Sure. If they are in that state of activation in their nervous system, they’re less resilient and resourceful to handle what’s going on around them. If we can handle what’s happening internally, we’re going to better handle what’s happening externally around us. Probably the biggest thing that shows up in my work that I lean into is compassion. So we know from neuroscience that compassion lights up certain parts of our brain, and that soothes that lower part of the brain that we were just talking about. It calms it down. And then, a soothed nervous system soothes other nervous systems. So, what can you do to, kind of, soothe what’s happening inside of you? How can you pay attention to the anxiety you are feeling, the stress you’re feeling?

Our brains want to move towards the calmest brain in the room. So that’s that non-anxious presence, you know, when everybody’s spun up, that raises their hand and says, “Hey, what about this?” And everybody kind of takes a deep breath. That’s our nervous system reading each other’s nervous systems, and wanting to move to that place of regulation.

Beth: Kyle, I’m curious about your experience, and your view now, of where pastoral care reaches its limit, and where someone like you is necessary, and we can partner with them. And the reason I’m saying that is because I think pastoral care is really important, and we don’t want to send our people out to get therapy when, actually, pastoral care is what they need. At the same time, it can be dangerous if we dabble in things that we are not equipped to deal with. Help us understand how that partnership, that overlap, those danger zones come together, since you’ve worked in both of those areas.

Kyle: Probably a good rule of thumb is just whenever in doubt, refer out. If you feel like you’ve, kind of, gotten past your capacity, if you feel like you’re into areas that you’re not sure about, or if you’re seeing patterns that feels different to you, then yeah, refer out if it feels out of your scope, to be honest.

But even the way I look at that concept of sin and things, when you understand things through the lens of ner- the nervous system, it just really changes things. Our brain sometimes confuses familiar with safe. And so you may be pushing someone to, “Hey, why are you continuing to do this?” Or “What’s happening here?” Something like that. And what you may not recognize is that their brain is confusing familiar with safe.

So I'm coming out of the church world, and I, initially I was working for a center where they used God language on their website, so I had a lot of people coming in who faith was part of their journey, part of their background, part of who they are. And what I would find is that there was this place where we would get tripped up, where I'm inviting them into compassion, or I'm inviting them into some of these things to understand their behavior. I'm never asking the question, "What's wrong with you?" I'm asking the question, "What happened to you? What have you been through? What have you experienced?"

And so, we'd hit this place where it was, "Well, anything that is good that I do is not me, it's God. Anything that I do that is awful, that's the actual me." So there's this kind of identity place. And so, if you grow up in a chaotic environment, your brain may seek chaos as a comfort, because that's what actually feels safe for you.

And so, when you think about it from a lens of sin, I think one of the great, kind of, examples is Fr. Gregory Boyle in the Homeboy Industries and all that. It's a gang rehabilitation group out in Los Angeles. And so, former gang members come in, they're given belonging, they're given jobs, and there's a lot of transformation that happens in that space. And so, are those folks — who we would generally call "engaging in bad behavior" — are they doing that in part because of the sin that's in them? Are they doing that in part because of the way their nervous system has been imprinted on by their life experiences? Yeah, it just brings a lot of, for me, back to that compassion piece. When I think about sin now, I think a little bit less individual, and a little more corporate. Well, what can we do about that, kind of, larger issue that is putting people in a place where they're having these adverse childhood experiences that are then causing them to, kind of, seek this type of behavior out, because that's what's living in their nervous system?

Jennifer: As a culture, our response to crime, our response to sin, our response to things that are not good, is punishment. So, I think looking at it through a lens of compassion can be revolutionary. And I think as Christians, that's what we're called to do. We're not called to shame people. Jesus doesn't shame us. Jesus comes to redeem us. So when you're working with people who you see this kind of, "I did something bad, I'm a sinner, I need to be punished", what does it look like practically when we're talking about this lens of compassion? What does the actual process look like in terms of how we think about this, particularly when we do have redemption and restoration, and what does that look like?

Mark: What's God's role in this?

Kyle: It's a great question. I think it's a relational container that can allow for a lot of people to experience that tangible aspect of compassion, of love, of grace that they need to be able to look inside, see what's happening inside of them, in a way where they can be honest about their own story. You know, I think for a lot of us, we don't do our internal work, unfortunately, until some external thing happens that forces us to do that. And I think one of the things — I experienced this in my own upbringing in the church — is that I think I was invited into safe places where I was able to see myself fully, because I knew the people around me cared for me and loved me. And I was able to, in a way, do some of my own internal work because of that container. And then in the context of the relationship as I understood it with God, of the compassion and the grace that was found there for me, where I felt like I could be honest, and from that space, venture out a little bit. And I had some great relational containers and pastors and youth pastors and other people in my life where I could venture out a little bit to be a little more honest about that internal work. But unfortunately for a lot of us, yeah, we don't do it until something external happens that forces us to then look internal.

Beth: I don't speak your language. I speak the faith language, and I think it's really important in the church we continue to speak the faith language, but I also don't think we are living in two different worlds. Your saying that people being afraid makes them literally "flip their lid", makes God's words "do not be afraid" more powerful to me. You saying people will choose familiarity over safety reminds me of the Israelites who would rather go back to Egypt than live in the unknown. So I just want to make sure that, for those listening, this is relevant to the ministry that we do and the stories that we tell. We may not speak in terms of the nervous system, but we do speak about grace and redemption and peace. And I think that's what we can take from this conversation, to realize we are not opposites of each other, and we can actually partner with each other as we deal with the mental health, spiritual, as well as emotional wholeness crisis that we're all facing right now.

Kyle: Yes, I completely agree. For me, it has actually helped me make sense more of my faith and more of my understanding of what I see around me. Because once I see through this lens, it's almost impossible not to see through this lens, at least for me. It actually helps me live into my faith, into my humanity, into my compassion for people. I was teaching this, actually, at a church, for a parenting class I did recently. And after I finished, an older gentleman came up to me and he said, "Hey, what you're teaching is really simple, but I'm a retired medical doctor and I never heard this." And he was like, "People need to understand this." Because when you can understand, sort of, this function in you, in your humanity and what's happening here, I think it brings a lot of compassion for self and compassion for others. And from that space of compassion for self and compassion from others, we are going to operate completely different. We're going to have more room to listen to each other, more room to have harder conversations, more room to understand the nuances that are happening in the life around us, and be better able to navigate the things that are externally, or the challenges that are in front of us. So the best scenarios in my mind that churches are going to bring forward are going to come from this place of, sort of, grounded resilience. And those resources specifically I'm talking about are wisdom and empathy and compassion and the fruits of the Spirit and all those things.

Beth: You were in vocational ministry for many years. What would you say to your former self? That is, what would you say to us as we feel called to ministry, feel called to work in the church, which was, as Mark says, "God's idea", regardless of what that feels like sometimes. What do we have to offer in this moment? Not something new, we don't need another program to take care of. But what does the church do well that speaks to this moment, and meets some of the needs and the challenges that we could focus on, hold onto?

Kyle: Yeah, great question. If I went back to my former self...even in- this was a part of my ministry when I was doing ministry with young folks was, we would say, "We want kids to be known so they can know God." And the idea was, until someone feels kind of known and seen, they're not going to be open to the experience. I didn't have the neuroscience language then, but what I would've said is, "Oh yeah, there's an element of what's happening there when we know and see people, when we invite them in relationally, when we really get to understand their world, when we meet them with compassion, then they themselves move out of that protective state, into a more open and connective state, and that's the place where they can start to explore these larger themes of faith and God and identity and who they are and how that plays out."

I would probably lean into what are some of the relational components of how we are doing things? How are we creating places of welcome? How are we increasing our compassion? How are we teaching our people to be more compassionate, and go put them in places to experience that and be that? So it goes from practice to trait to state. So if I practice something, it becomes a brain trait that I can access,

and the more I access that, the more that's who I become. When I think about spiritual formation or character development in those kinds of practices, which I would say, so, a little more experiential, a little more slowing things down, maybe even a little more mystical of meeting and experiencing some kind of relational dynamic, because that will be the places where I start to develop that character formation.

Mark: Yeah. Kyle, thank you. This has been a workout for us, but we need that, so thank you. One of the things I think we all carry the conviction of is, the church, if it's going to continue to be relevant and impactful in the world, we have to bring in the sorts of things you're offering here. You've given us a gift here and, uh, we really appreciate it. Thanks.

Kyle: Yeah, of course. Thank y'all.