

Revolving Clergy Harms Religion

By Gerald L. Zelizer

The Rev. Charles Chandler felt so blindsided when he was forced out of his church eight years ago that he established the Ministering to Ministers Foundation, which provides emergency funds, housing, and legal, psychological, and career assistance for clergy of any denomination who have suffered a similar fate.

In 2001, his organization helped approximately 500 ousted or beleaguered ministers. That's up from 400 the year before and 100 when he started.

While few churches routinely keep track of clergy firings, a general survey of those who do suggest the trend is getting worse:

- ◆ A study by the Barna Research Group, which does marketing studies of American culture and the Christian faith, found that whereas 20 years ago the average minister remained at least seven years in his parish, today his stay has eroded to barely five years. Barna's research, conducted between July 2000 and June 2001, was based on a survey of 1,865 senior pastors of Protestant churches nationwide. This trend, George Barna warns, "may be shortchanging pastors – and the congregations they oversee – by prematurely terminating their tenure."
- ◆ Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice-president of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly, acknowledges that 30% of rabbis who changed positions in 2000 did so because they were forced to leave their congregations.
- ◆ Similarly, Marcia Myers, director of personnel services for the Presbyterian Church (USA), reports that of the 84 cases in which relations were ended in 2000, one-fourth were involuntary

To give some context to these numbers, Kevin Leicht, professor of sociology at the University of Iowa and author of *Professional Work*, says, "Clergy firings are very high compared with the national labor force, where 1.2% of all employees are involuntarily terminated. The rate is even higher than coaches in the NFL, a notoriously unstable profession." This uprooting comes with costs to both the church and its minister:

- ◆ The congregation misses the most productive period of the pastor's tenure, which Barna says is from years 10 through 14.
- ◆ There are the emotional wounds to the congregation as they push God's emissary out.
- ◆ Most grievous is the trauma to the minister, who must dislodge his family and leave town.

For the good of the congregation and clergy, more aggressive strategies are needed to halt this trend. A separate study by church consultant Alan Klass, president of Mission Growth Ministries, investigated the causes of ousters in various Christian denominations and tried to find the source of the problem and where opportunities for reform exist. This report put most of the blame on the congregation:

- ◆ In 67% of the cases, the congregation had been in conflict with the previous pastor, too.
- ◆ In 45% of the cases, a minority faction was successful in manipulating a supportive majority to push the pastor out.
- ◆ Only 7% of the time was the cause the personal misconduct of the minister.

- ◆ Sadly for all, in 62% of the cases, regional officials of these various denominations who could have helped mediate were kept away until it was too late to solve the dispute.

To put a human face on this problem, consider the case of Pastor Matthew Robinson. Robinson says he was asked in 1995 to bring stability to the First Presbyterian Church in Hobbs, NM, which had lost more than 100 members and suffered from financial problems.

Through his programs for new and potential members, the church's roster quickly grew by 50 new members. By 1996, the church's finances were the healthiest in a decade. But for some longtime laity, their previous gifts to the church suddenly seemed mediocre when measured against the burgeoning new pledges that Robinson's stewardship was eliciting.

With the arrival of many new faces, one angry churchgoer complained to the pastor, "You are bringing in too many blue-collar members," and another said his dramatics in worship were not done "decently and in order."

Finally, Robinson sought other posts. By Thanksgiving 1999, he was called to a larger and more stable church in Kearney, Neb. "I could have stuck it out," he says, "but it was not worth a heart attack."

This ecclesiastical hell is bred in the contradictory situation of the minister who works for God and simultaneously for the will of his congregation. But even within that conflicting organizational structure, more can be done.

For one, church elders should skillfully exclude from leadership roles laity whom the author G. Lloyd Rediger calls "clergy killers." Their complaints should be heard, but they should be blocked from bullying the silent and satisfied majority of parishioners into unreasonable dissatisfaction.

Secondly, all denominations should appoint teams composed of a layperson and a clergy member to actively intervene as the relationship between a particular congregation and its minister begins to sour, to identify the problems, recommend solutions and then return to monitor improvement.

The leaders of Protestant and Jewish houses of worship, which are largely autonomous and decentralized, would likely resist this solution. But if not done, the risk is that the most competent clergy will flee the calling, mediocrity will fill the void, church numbers will erode, and America's faiths will diminish.

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First Printed in USA TODAY on February 21, 2002