

Forced to Leave: Forced Termination Experiences of Assemblies of God Clergy and Its Connection to Stress and Well-Being Outcomes

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Abstract Although forced termination has been a subject of interest to clergy for some time, social scientists have generally studied job loss as if it was the same phenomenon regardless of occupation. Ministry work by itself has always been difficult and stressful, and termination from this occupation has been reported to be the result of a demeaning and systematic process of involuntary removal of paid and non-paid clergy-persons that includes psychological, socio-emotional, and spiritual abuse. This pilot project sampled 227 active ministers from the Assemblies of God denomination via an online survey and asked about their experiences with forced termination, as well as measures of their personal and family well-being. In general, ministers who had been forced from a ministry position had less family well-being and more health problems than those who had not been forced out.

Keywords Forced termination · Clergy health · Family well-being · Stress

Introduction

Forced termination has been a subject of interest to clergy for some time, yet termination among this select group has garnered very little attention in scientific journals. Ministry work has always been difficult and stressful (Blizzard 1958). Social science researchers have provided a plethora of research on the effects of stressful work but have not attended to differences within particular occupations by and large. Though some attention has been paid to the special pressures of ministry work, there has been virtually no scholarly work on one of the most detrimental and psychologically traumatic experiences a minister may have—forced termination. Very little empirical work exists on forced termination of clergy. The following focuses on some of the challenges of ministry work when examined in light of challenges of paid work documented in the literature, and it introduces the concept of forced termination among clergy using job loss research as a backdrop.

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Ministry work

Unique characteristics

The church can be viewed as a controlling organization that makes demands in all aspects of the minister's life and many aspects in the lives of the entire ministry family (Lee and Balswick 2006). As with all occupations that may exert strong control over workers, job stress is not easily coped with, mainly because the job environment usually cannot be modified by the individual worker (Iacovides et al. 2003). The clergy work environment is controlled by the people who call a particular church "home" (Monahan 1999) as opposed to other vocational arenas that are controlled by stockholders, owners, etc. The unique workplace configuration of the church allows unmediated stressors to infiltrate the lives of the clergy family at an individual level and at a systemic level. Researchers have identified and studied the effects of ministry demands on both clergy and their spouses.

Ministry demands and stress

Empirical research has demonstrated that intrusive demands of the job are detrimental to the attitude and well-being of ministers (Han and Lee 2004; Lee 1999, 2007; Lee and Balswick 2006; Lee and Iverson-Gilbert 2003; Morris and Blanton 1994b). Research has connected job demands to marital and family well-being. Four classifications of intrusive demands have been identified by Lee (1999) in a survey of 312 ministers from five Protestant dominations: personal criticism, presumptive expectations, boundary ambiguity, and family criticism. Ministers experienced higher levels of presumptive expectations and boundary ambiguity than criticisms in Lee's study. When both the frequency and the impact to the minister of each intrusive demand were taken into account by Lee, the frequency and impact of personal criticism, presumptive expectations, and boundary ambiguity were significantly correlated with measures of burnout.

The nature of pastoral stress typically stems from emotional stress (Mills and Koval 1971), unrealistic and intrusive expectations (Lee and Balswick 2006; Morris and Blanton 1994a), and financial concerns (Morris and Blanton 1994b). Pastoral stress, stemming from intrusive job demands, has been demonstrated to affect the quality of marital and family life, as indicated by Morris and Blanton's (1994a) study of 272 clergy husbands and wives and their follow-up of 132 clergy couples (1998). In particular, boundary intrusiveness was associated with lower marital and parental satisfaction, an issue with time demands was connected to lower parental satisfaction, and a lack of social support was negatively associated with life satisfaction. Disengagement with the marital partner occurred with increased stress, as did marital conflict, and a more permissive family atmosphere (Morris and Blanton 1998). It is commonly known that religious conservatives tend to be more strict in regards to parenting and marriage relationships thus having a more permissive family atmosphere would be in opposition to the typical conservative family atmosphere of clergy (Mahoney et al. 2001). Husbands—the clergy members in this sample—who had higher time demands perceived less family cohesion and perceived that their family atmosphere became more authoritarian. Wives' stress from increased time demands was positively correlated with their perception of enmeshment and authoritarian atmosphere. Bolstering Lee's (1999) conclusion of the impact of stress from work on personal life, Morris and Blanton (1998) concluded that perceptions of social context stressors negatively affect the family functioning capabilities of both clergy husbands and wives.

Chronic stress as a result of the constant barrage of demanding churchgoers has led many ministers to burnout. Burnout is defined as emotional exhaustion, a result of chronic stress from working with people (Maslach et al. 2001). There are three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (an uncaring or dehumanized attitude), and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Randall 2004). Ministers experience a range of physical and psychological problems associated with burnout (Kaldor and Bullpitt 2001).

Serious health repercussions of the stress of ministry work have been identified when research studies have examined the issue. Duke Divinity School conducted a survey among 2,500 religious leaders and found that 10% reported being depressed, while 40% reported being depressed at times or “worn out” some or most of the time. Serious health problems also were uncovered in the study; for example, 76% of clergy were either overweight or obese (McMillan 2003; Wells 2002). Ministry demands and other unique characteristics lead to stress and burnout and sometimes result in clergy making the decision to change vocations, leaving the ministry altogether (Hoge and Wenger 2005).

Job loss

While job loss can be considered a discrete event and a process, a relevant review of research on the consequences of forced job termination among ministers must focus primarily on the connection between job loss and psychological and physiological outcomes. Because the impact of job loss is generally detrimental to individuals by virtually any criteria a researcher chooses to examine, researchers have tried to understand the process of how people cope with job loss (Kinicki and Latack 1990; Leana and Feldman 1992). Researchers have linked involuntary job loss to diminished self-esteem (Gurney 1981; Winefield et al. 1987), decreased life satisfaction (Fagin 1981), depression (Tiggemann and Winefield 1984), increased levels of stress (Baum et al. 1986; Dooley and Catalano 1988; Winefield and Tiggemann 1989), and a general reduction in well-being (Kinicki 1985; Winefield and Tiggemann 1990).

Depression has emerged as the prominent mental health outcome of job loss (Dew et al. 1992; Dooley and Catalano 1988; Kasl et al. 1998). Financial strain and its consequences are critical mediators in the relationship between unemployment and depression (Vinokur and Schul 1997). Kessler et al. (1987) found that financial strain accounted for 90% of the explained variance in mental health problems.

Considering how job loss might affect a given individual and family, it is important to consider functioning prior to the job loss. Since clergy work is known to be associated with health challenges, including stress and being overweight, the experience of job loss among this population may be especially challenging. Furthermore, the financial status of the family prior to the job loss has a role to play in their financial strain after the job loss. It has been widely reported that the occupation of clergy is associated with financial stress (Lavender 1983; Lee and Balswick 1989; Morris and Blanton 1998). In fact, Lavender (1983) reported that 95% of all clergy are grossly underpaid, indicating that clergy are five times more likely than the rest of the labor force to hold two or more jobs. Lee and Balswick (1989) found that the clergy ranked inadequate finances as the second most pressing problem endemic to ministry. Job loss that occurs after chronic financial strain is likely to have even stronger effects on mental health and stress than other circumstances surrounding job loss.

Forced termination among clergy

Forced termination in the ministry has been studied anecdotally for many years, particularly in connection with pastor advocacy, support, and outreach programs. Primary, information concerning forced termination comes from five sources: Barfoot et al. (2005) descriptive information from the pastors-in-residence program they administer, 1984 and 2000 studies of the Southwestern Baptist Conference published by Willis (2001), a report by the LifeWay Christian Resources (Turner 2007) on forced terminations, an unpublished empirical dissertation (Crowell 1995), and a convenience sample of magazine subscribers (LaRue 1996a, b, c, 1997a, b). Barfoot et al. (2005) described forced termination as occurring when “a pastor may abdicate his post due to the constant negativity found in personal attacks and criticism from a small faction within the congregation from whom the minister feels psychologically pressured to step down from his or her service of ministry” (p. 2). Greenfield (2001) described forced termination as a process whereby “clergy killers” blame the minister and/or family for the church’s problems in highly public attacks. The authors define forced termination as the result of a process of involuntary removal of paid and non-paid clergy-persons that includes psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual abuse. This definition does not account for those clergy who are terminated for cause. Some clergy decide to leave the ministry entirely and enter a different line of work after experiencing forced termination.

The prevalence of forced termination is a matter of interest in the literature. Crowell’s (1995) survey of 386 ministers from 48 denominations found 25.3% of pastors had been forcibly terminated at some point in their career. LaRue’s body of research (all involving a nonrandom sample of 593 respondents who were subscribers to a popular Christian periodical) identified 23% of respondents as having been forcibly terminated (1996a, b, c, 1997a, b). A 1984 study of the Southwestern Baptist Conference reported that 1,056 pastors were forcibly terminated; Willis (2001) noted that in the year 2000 study, the prevalence of forced termination among ministers had decreased to 750. However, including staff members brought the total up to 987. A later report by LifeWay Christian Resources (Turner 2007) showed 1,302 ministers had been terminated in 2005, but there was no indication of what percentage of ministers is represented.

Origin of forced termination

The origin of forced termination appears to be different for ministers as compared to other professions (Winefield et al. 1992). For ministers, forced termination often has nothing to do with organizational cutbacks, layoffs, or early retirement. Instead, forced termination often occurs via a much more stressful process, described by Barfoot et al. (2005) as a psychological attack. Greenfield (2001) identified a demeaning and systematic process in which an initial accuser enlists key people in the congregation to become “sympathizers” at a secret meeting, during which time information is gathered to blame the minister and/or family for the church’s problems. Leymann (1996) and Leymann and Gustafsson (1996) described a process of *mobbing* in the work place where a “victim is subjected to a systematic, stigmatizing process and encroachment of his or her civil rights” (p. 165).

Causes of forced termination

Little is known about the causes of forced termination. Greenfield (2001) suggested that while many commonalities exist among clergy who have experienced forced

termination, there is no one set pattern or sequence of events. Barfoot et al. (2005) explicated factors that typically lead to forced termination, such as personality conflicts and conflicting vision for the church. Other causes may be centered around budget issues, poor planning or organization on the part of leadership, and certain groups feeling ignored by the pastoral staff. Greenfield (2001) wrote that, “It doesn’t really matter what the problems are...In most cases the minister is blamed...[and] is responsible for whatever is wrong in the church and its ministry” (p. 24). Distinguishing between different causal processes that result in termination is a complex endeavor that goes beyond this scope of the literature and the current work.

Effects of forced termination

Financial effects have been well documented. In Barfoot et al.’s (2005) work, financial instability was a challenge for 69% of the pastors, which is understandable since 50% received no severance package. In the Willis (2001) study, only 35.2% received any severance, a frequency that seems more reliable than Barfoot’s findings, which were limited to a select group. Given that Barfoot et al. (2005) reported that 75% of the pastors in residence could not survive financially longer than four months after being terminated, the financial repercussions of forced termination are perhaps even more severe than those in other vocations because clergy are not eligible for unemployment benefits (Gallagher 2009; Hammar 1998).

The body of work of LaRue (1996a, b, c, 1997a, b) is suggestive of many life changes for clergy who have been forcibly terminated and for their families. Many changes occurred: 64% of clergy spouses had to change jobs, and 66% of children were forced to change schools. Change in the clergy members’ self-confidence has been found: 58–59% of pastors had a drop in their self-confidence as a leader in LaRue’s and Barfoot’s work. Family problems have been suggested: in LaRue’s work, 54% of pastors reported a heavy emotional toll on their spouse, while Barfoot reported that families experienced a diminished ability to trust people (71% and 67%). Health was a concern: emotional health problems were identified by 59% of Barfoot’s sample, and 10% of LaRue’s sample reported a major illness within one year of forced termination.

Studying forced termination

Forced termination among clergy appears to be surprisingly prevalent. The systematic process of this particular type of job loss has been suggested to have a collateral effect on the entire clergy family. Given the financial problems, emotional difficulties, and interpersonal challenges documented in the job loss literature and already present in clergy workers prior to termination, it is logical that forced termination among clergy members should affect their stress level, family well-being, and general health. Therefore the authors generated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis one predicts significant group differences between ministers who have been terminated and those who have not in terms of marriage and family satisfaction and general health problems.

Hypothesis two predicts that reduced marriage and family satisfaction and more general health problems are associated with higher stress levels for those who had been terminated.

Methods

Procedure

Four district offices of the Assemblies of God denomination (West Texas, North Texas, New Mexico, and Rocky Mountain) agreed to publicize a pilot study to the ministers in their respective districts via email, monthly newsletter, or both. This type of recruitment allowed for a sample of Assemblies of God ministers in the southwestern United States. At the time of the study there were 252 credentialed ministers in New Mexico, 1,687 in North Texas, 534 in the Rocky Mountain districts, and 262 in West Texas, for a total of 2,735. We received 227 responses to the survey, giving us a 12% participation rate.¹ Several studies have found that response rates for internet surveys are lower than equivalent mail surveys (Couper et al. 1999; Solomon 2001). A study comparing response rates of mail and web surveys revealed a significant difference between mail-only survey response rates and email-only survey response rates (Kaplowitz et al. 2004). Their study showed a response rate of about 20% for email-only. It should further be stated that recruiting clergy for studies such as this can be problematic, as the experience of forced termination is often not validated by their professional network. Clergy who have experienced forced termination could be considered a hard to reach population because of the sensitive nature of the subject. Studies of sensitive subjects have used the social networks of participants to recruit other participants (Browne 2005; Watters and Biernacki 1989).

The survey was conducted online and was anonymous. Anonymity is important due to the sensitivity of issues around forced termination. Indeed, all the district offices voiced concern that respondents and congregations would be able to be identified. It is possible that the online administration created some bias because ministers without access to the internet would have been unable to respond; however, the value of anonymity was viewed as outweighing the sampling bias.

Ministers were invited to participate in the pilot study through email of listserves of the membership of the region and/or advertising in a monthly newsletter. Interested ministers went to the link presented in the recruitment information. There was no login required by the respondent, which maintained anonymity. A URL redirection made it easy for respondents to access the survey, i.e., instead of using the long “coded” link provided by the software provider, the authors used “<http://survey.healingchoice.org>”.

The online survey had 86 questions and took participants about 15 minutes to complete. Each screen gave respondents instructions on the question set, e.g., for the General Health Question set, respondents were asked to identify selected health problems they had experienced over the past year. All respondents were asked questions to determine their views on ministry demands, stress, family satisfaction, marriage satisfaction, and general health. Near the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked whether they had experienced forced termination (*yes* or *no*) and were asked questions concerning their perception of termination (PTM). For those who had not experienced forced termination, the authors used skip-logic to omit the PTM questions. At the end of the survey, the respondents were redirected to a second

¹ The authors contacted the national or regional offices for the Assemblies of God, Southern Baptist Convention, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, Church of God, and Presbyterian denominations. Only one, the Assemblies of God, returned our phone calls and engaged in conversation about the research. The other denominations did not respond to our multiple attempts to engage with the research. Ultimately, all refused to participate on a national level. Although the Assemblies of God did not participate in the study at the national level, they seemed most receptive to the research. Five district offices for the Assemblies of God were contacted about participating in the study (West Texas, South Texas, North Texas, New Mexico, and Rocky Mountain). One of the authors spoke with district officials for all of the districts and answered questions about the study. This project was approved by the Human Subjects Board at Texas Tech University.

survey which asked for personal contact information for a forthcoming follow-up study in which ministry couples would be invited to participate. If they agreed to do so, they were asked to enter their contact information, which could not be linked to the previous survey.

Participants

We received 227 responses for the survey, including 195 males and 32 females (Table 1). The respondents varied in age, with the largest group (84 respondents) representing the *55 and older* group. Two hundred sixteen were *married*, six were *single/never married*, three were *single/divorced*, and two were *single/widowed*. A little more than half of the respondents had children who were living at home. At the time of the survey over two-thirds (161 respondents) were working *full-time* in ministry, 34 were *part-time*, and 24 were *volunteer*. Of those working in ministry, 96 had been working in ministry between 25 and 50 years. About half of the respondents held the position of senior pastor while a third held a position described as *other (Missionary, Evangelist, etc.)*. Forty-one percent of the respondents had experienced forced termination.

Measures

General health

Participants' health was assessed using 17 items from a subscale of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Generic Job Stress Questionnaire. The

Table 1 Minister's demographic variables: descriptive statistics

Variables	M	SD	%	α	n
Minister Gender					221
Male			86		
Female			14		
Minister Age ^a	3.77	1.18			220
Minister's Marital Status ^b					220
Married			95		
All other Categories			5		
Ministry Position ^c	3.45	1.23			222
Terminated Ministers	1.60	.49			217
Yes			41		
No			59		
Perceptions of Termination (PTM)	31.36	5.76		.75	87
Perceived Stress (PSS)	26.59	6.77		.90	203
Marriage Satisfaction (KMS)	16.96	4.45		.96	191
Family Satisfaction (FS)	15.83	3.62		.87	191
General Health	1.77	.79		.90	194

^a Minister age: 1=18–25, 2=26–35, 3=36–45, 4=46–55, 5=55–Over. ^b Minister's marital status: 1=Married, 2=Single/Never, 3=Single/Divorced, 4=Single/Widowed. ^c Minister's position: 1=Associate, 2=Children's, 3=Senior, 4=Youth, 5=Other.

measure has several subscales and the authors endorse the use of the subscales, and its independently (Hurrell and McLaney 1988). In this study, the authors focused on assessing somatic complaints. A sample item from the “General Health” sub-scale is “you were in ill health which affected your work.” The respondents answered using a Likert scale: 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A high score indicates poor health. Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .90. High scores on this measure indicate poorer health.

Perceived stress (PSS)

Participants were assessed using the perceived stress scale (PSS-10). The PSS-10 is a ten-item scale designed to measure general stress (Cohen et al. 1983). A sample item is “In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?” The five-point ratings range from zero (never) to four (very often), indicating the frequency in which the participants experienced each of the items; a high score indicates high stress. Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .90.

Family well-being

Family well-being was assessed by combining the Kansas Marital Satisfaction (KMS) scale (Schumm et al. 1986) with an adapted version of the KMS. The KMS is a three-item scale with scores ranging from one (extremely dissatisfied) to seven (extremely satisfied); a high score will indicate being extremely satisfied with family well-being. The authors used the same three questions from the KMS but changed the word “spouse” to “family.” The adapted scale had six questions. A sample item is, “How satisfied have you been with your spouse?” The adapted scale with all six items had a Cronbach’s Alpha of .91.

Results

Hypothesis one predicted significant group differences between ministers who have been terminated compared with those who have not in terms of family well-being and general health problems. Data were screened in order to determine if the group of ministers who had experienced forcible termination differed in age, income, or ministry position from the group who had not experienced termination. There were no significant differences between the groups on this background information based on the means between groups: ($t=-.91$, $-.05$, $-.96$, respectively, $p>.10$). Therefore, subsequent analyses did not account for the potential covariation between background characteristics and well-being or health. Thus, a MANOVA was used to compare those who had been forced from a ministry position and those who had not on scores of family well-being, health, and stress. The multivariate result was significant (Pillai’s Trace=.141, $F=8.573$, $df=(1,159)$, $p<.001$), indicating differences in levels of family well-being, stress, and health between those who had been forced from a ministry position and those who had not. The univariate F tests showed there was a significant difference between the forcibly terminated group and the never-terminated group on family well-being, $F=6.128$, $df=(1,160)$, $p<.01$, and health, $F=20.753$, $df=(1,159)$, $p<.001$. However, the F tests on the stress scale were not significant, $F=1.64$, $df=(1,159)$, $p>.10$. Thus, those who had been forced out were not significantly different in their stress level from those who had not been forced out.

The dependent variables that were significant via the multivariate analysis of variance strategy were then analyzed using a one-way ANOVA as a follow-up, and means

comparisons were then employed. First, family well-being was significantly different between the groups; $F(1, 171)=7.67, p<.01, \eta^2=.21$. Ministers who had been terminated ($M=31.31, SD=7.68$) were more dissatisfied with their family well-being than those who had not been terminated ($M=34.17, SD=5.87$).

Secondly, general health was significantly different between the groups: $F(1, 184)=25.95, p<.001, \eta^2=.35$. Those who had been terminated ($M=21.77, SD=8.73$) had poorer health than those who had not been terminated ($M=16.70, SD=4.77$). High scores on the health measure indicate poorer health. Because age seems to be a natural indicator for poor health, an ANCOVA was utilized as a follow-up to control for the age variable. Age was not a significant control variable for poor health among the two clergy groups, those who had been forced out compared to those who had not, $F(1, 185)=2.46, p>.11$.

Associations between stress and well-being among the clergy who had been terminated

Hypothesis two turns attention specifically to the group of clergy who had been forcibly terminated from clergy positions. In attempting to account for the outcomes of family well-being and poor health, hypothesis two asserts that higher stress levels will account for lower family well-being and poor health among clergy who were forcibly terminated. At the zero-order level, stress (PSS) was significantly correlated with family well-being, $r=-.515, p<.001$; such that the more satisfied clergy were with their family well-being, the less stress they had. General health was also correlated with stress ($r=.499, p<.001$), such that the more stress clergy experienced, the poorer the health (Table 2).

Utilizing a multivariate strategy, regression analysis was used to account for the experience of family well-being and health. Table 3 shows that among ministers who had been forcibly terminated, family well-being and health were significantly associated with stress, such that low family well-being and low health were associated with higher stress. The n for the regression analysis is lower than earlier reported because of missing data. There were a total of 89 ministers who reported being forcibly terminated, but only 63 of those completed the measures for this analysis. The regression model accounted for 48.5% of the variance in the stress experienced by clergy who had been terminated.

Discussion

Forced termination of clergy is a needed line of research inquiry. Literature, both systematic and anecdotal, reveals that such termination is quite prevalent among ministers, is distinct for that occupation, and has not been adequately investigated. While it has features in common with other types of job loss, elements of the clergy position and of the termination experience suggested that stress and well-being subsequent to termination would be worthy of scientific inquiry. Although scholarly research on the topic had not heretofore been

Table 2 Correlations

Variables	1	2	3
1.Family Well-Being	–		
2.General Health	–.288***	–	
3.Stress	–.515***	.499***	–

*** $p<.001$. (two-tailed)

Table 3 Summary of logistic regression analysis for variables predicting stress among respondents who were forcibly terminated

Predictor	B	SE B	β
General Health	.37	.07	.50*
Family Well-Being	-.28	.08	-3.5*
Constant	28.47	3.32	
<i>R</i> ²		.485	
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²		28.19*	

* $p < .001$; $n = 63$

conducted, what has been written concerning forced termination of clergy provided a strong rationale for the study.

This pilot study, with a narrow sample, demonstrated that almost half of the respondents had experienced forced termination. Non-scholarly work had offered that a quarter of clergy in all denominations have experienced forced termination. Among those who responded to this research, 41% had experienced forced termination. For such a large problem, forced termination of clergy is sorely missing from the extant literature on ministry work.

Not only is forced termination an even that has occurred for many clergy, it is also a process that apparently is associated with detrimental effects long after the termination event. Ministers who experienced forced termination had a lower sense of family well-being compared to those who had not been terminated. They were less satisfied with their marriages and families. Perhaps the added pressures of being forced out of a position strains the cohesiveness of the family unit. More research is needed to show how clergy couples experience and cope with forced termination. Given that this study was cross-sectional in design, it would be prudent for researchers to attempt to determine a baseline for family well-being before the event and after forced termination.

Ministers who experienced forced termination were found in this study to have poorer health compared to those who had not been terminated. While it is impossible to prove causation with the design of this study and without a controlled testing environment, the health levels of this population are cause for concern in any case. One might immediately assume that age would be associated with the health of ministers such that older ministers would have more health problems than younger ministers, but in this study age was not related to health nor to whether a minister had been terminated. More research is needed to determine how detrimental forced termination is to the health of those who experience it.

Ministers who have experienced forced termination have a low perspective of family well-being and poor health, which exhibits itself alongside high stress levels. Stress itself was not significantly predicted by forced termination but is a factor in creating problems for the ministry family. This is not really a surprise, as researchers have shown that ministry is a stressful occupation. What we were able to show is that effects related to forced termination were also indicative of higher stress. Among ministers who have been forcibly terminated, how high their stress levels were at the time of data collection was strongly influenced by their perception of their families' well-being and their report of their general health. On the positive side, ministers who had been terminated with high levels of family well-being and personal health did not exhibit signs of stress. In this way, it might be that their family was a coping resource and that their health promotion behaviors equipped them to manage stress well.

Limitations

The sampling procedure and the narrow sample of one Christian denomination limit the generalizability of the research. However, it should be clear that two main issues prohibit more common sampling procedures. First, clergy who have experienced forced termination may not be willing to come forward. The idea of being forced out of a ministry position is stigmatizing and hurtful. It was important to garner support from groups that have contact with ministers, such as the district offices. Studies of sensitive subject have used the social networks of participants to recruit other participants (Browne 2005; Watters and Biernacki 1989). Watters and Biernacki (1989) describe the need for focused and targeted sampling when working with hidden populations. They posit that typical sampling procedures under represent hidden populations and that relying “on published lists or official records as the basis for selecting probability samples has already introduced...biases that may seriously compromise the results of research directed at hidden populations” (p. 419). Second, not only are ministers reluctant to participate, but the majority of denominations do not keep track of forced terminations, making sampling difficult (Chandler 2001). These issues force researchers to pursue targeted samples rather than random samples (Schutt 2006).

This pilot study only surveyed clergy from The Assemblies of God, which has a different polity and call system than other denominations. The Assemblies of God is the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world, with nearly 3 million adherents in the United States and over 63 million adherents worldwide. In comparison, the Southern Baptist Convention has over 16 million adherents in the United States; both denominations have a similar system for calling ministers. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has a little over 2 million adherents, and the United Methodist Church has about 8 million members. Although these denominations differ in polity and call systems, preliminary analysis of data from a study being conducted by one of the authors reveals very few differences in experiences of forced termination among denominations.

A second limitation of the study is the limited and self-selected number of potential respondents who did choose to participate. In effect, sample self-selection allowed for the occurrence of potential biases in the ultimate sample. As described above, convenience samples are utilized in research on clergy in general, and they were required given the type of focus on the sensitive issue of forced termination among clergy. Dillman (2007) notes that the use of internet-based self-administered surveys are important with the rapid increase and acceptance of email and the internet. Nevertheless, the online nature of the survey precluded people who had no access to a computer or the internet from participating in the study and was a potential source of bias. As mentioned above, internet surveys generally have lower response rates, which may be due to some lack of knowledge on how to achieve high response rates. Low response rates may reflect a lack of familiarity with media and a lack of convenient access to the internet (Solomon 2001). It is possible that the potential respondents in the poorest mental, physical, and family health, as well as those most disillusioned with clergy work, would have been least likely to read the email from the church organization and would be least likely to respond.

Directions for future research

The authors have already demonstrated and bemoaned the general lack of scholarly research in the area. More research is needed on forced termination among clergy. With a lack of research in the area, there is much we do not know about forced termination. The unique workplace configuration makes losing a job in the ministry different than losing a

job in many other vocations. For example, clergy tend to experience more losses associated with forced termination than others. Not only do the clergy lose their salary associated with the ministry position, but if they live in a parsonage (church-owned home) they lose their home. In addition, they lose many of their friends associated with the church and a significant part of their support system. Like in other professions, clergy live and work far away from immediate and extended family thus relying on church members to be a pseudo-family providing similar social and emotional support to clergy family members. It is important that future researchers listen to the stories of ministers and families who have experienced forced termination. Gathering information over time about the process of termination would be an asset to the knowledge base. This study provided data suggesting a connection between family and stress, which could be pursued in qualitative and family-level studies.

Along with hearing from ministry families about their experience with forced termination, future research would allow for theory development in the area. As this theory is developed, future research could help us understand how ministry families cope with forced termination and could provide intervention. Theory development would also help researchers learn more about the predictors and processes of forced termination. It would be important for researchers to collect data from churches who have forced a pastor out, as they may have a very different perspective about the causes of forced termination. However, such a study would require a longitudinal, multi-informant, and multi-method design.

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