

The Process of Forced Termination: Couples in Ministry Share Their Experiences

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Abstract The stressful nature of ministry work has been well documented by researchers and professionals. However, both have generally failed to examine what is perhaps one of the most detrimental and psychologically traumatic experiences a minister may have associated with ministry work: forced termination. Forced termination should be considered an under-studied area of research and should be distinguished from choosing to leave the ministry or being fired from a ministry post. Forced termination is both the process and result of psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual abuse directed toward paid and non-paid ministry leaders by members of a congregation or denominational leaders, such that there is no other option for the minister but to leave the post. This qualitative study used a grounded theory approach to describe the experience of forced termination of couples where at least one individual is a vocational minister. Twenty-one couples agreed to participate in the study, and 14 were interviewed. The data of four couples are presented as representative of the saturated data from all 14 couples. Four important themes or stages the couples experienced emerged from the study: honeymoon, betrayal, harassment, and leaving the church.

Keywords Couples in ministry · Clergy health · Forced termination

Introduction

Although forced termination has been a subject of interest to clergy for some time, those who study ministry work have largely ignored what seems to be an increasing problem among Christian denominations. Very little empirical work exists on forced termination of clergy. However, studies have shown that at least 25 % of clergy, in general, have experienced a forced termination at least once during their career (Barfoot et al. 2005; Crowell 1995; Tanner et al. 2012). Some studies reveal a much higher frequency of forced termination within certain denominations (Tanner and Zvonkovic 2011; Tanner et al. 2012). Several of the previously

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mentioned studies also describe some of the negative effects associated with forced termination. However, to date no published study has qualitatively described the experience and the process or has included spouses as a participant.

Literature review

Forced termination

Forced termination may be best defined as both a process and result of psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual abuse or harassment directed towards paid and non-paid ministry leaders and their family by congregation members or denominational leaders, such that there is no other option for the minister but to leave the post. Greenfield (2001) describes several experiences of forced termination in his book *The Wounded Minister*. Onley (1994) describes her own experience as the spouse of a minister as they went through a forced termination. Rediger (1997), Faulkner (1986), and Crowell (1992) each describe experiences of ministers who faced forced termination. In each of these books, forced termination is described as a devastating and debilitating practice that often leaves the minister and his/her family struggling emotionally, spiritually, financially, and in some cases physically.

The origin of forced termination is still unclear, but it is often associated with personal and psychological attacks. Greenfield (2001) identified a demeaning and systematic process where ministers and sometimes their family are harassed and demeaned privately and publicly. Although references to an accuser appear in secondary sources, no primary research has uncovered whether this actually occurs. Leymann (1996) and Leymann and Gustafsson (1996) describe a similar process in the workplace called *mobbing*, where a “victim is subjected to a systematic, stigmatizing process and encroachment of his or her civil rights” (Leymann 1996, p. 165). The concept of mobbing in the workplace is very similar to the concept of forced termination among clergy.

Causes of forced termination

Little is known about the causes of forced termination. Greenfield (2001) suggests that while many commonalities exist among clergy who have experienced forced termination, there is no set pattern or sequence of events. Barfoot et al. (2005) identify personality conflicts and conflicting visions for the church as factors that typically lead to forced termination. 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) says, “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).

Differences between the pastor and the congregation in music and worship style are reported in Barfoot et al. (2005) work. Barfoot et al. (2005) and Willis (2001) identify conflict over leadership styles and visions for the church as potential reasons for forced termination. Crowell’s (1995) study involved a sampling of church congregation leaders and found that 21 % said the pastor was unfit or was not “called” and 20 % said congregational politics or powerful individuals were responsible for the pastor’s forced exit.

Effects of forced termination

Barfoot et al. (2005) discuss “areas of impact” (pp. 15–16) of forced termination, specifically the minister’s and their family’s diminished ability to trust people (71 and 67 %, respectively), financial instability (69 %), and lower self-confidence (59 %); problems with emotional health (59 %) were also indicated as an area of impact. Among the pastors who participated in the Barfoot et al. study, only 5 out of 10 received a severance package. An even smaller percentage, only 35.2 %, was reported to have received any severance package in the Willis (2001) study. Given that Barfoot et al. (2005) reported that 75 % of the pastors in residence could not survive financially longer than 4 months after being forced out, the financial repercussions of forced termination are often severe, perhaps more so than those in other vocations because clergy are not eligible for unemployment benefits.

Larue (1996a, b) indicates that the effects of forced termination are devastating; two thirds of children impacted by their parent’s forced termination were forced to change schools, 64 % of clergy spouses had to change jobs, 58 % of pastors had a drop in their self-confidence as a leader, and 54 % of pastors reported a heavy emotional toll on their spouse. Further, 10 % experienced a major illness within 12 months of being forced out, but there is no indication of what those major illnesses were or how they were measured.

Mobbing

The concept of *mobbing* in the workplace was introduced by Leymann (1996) and is defined as when a “victim is subjected to a systematic, stigmatizing process and encroachment of his or her civil rights” (p. 165). Operationalized, mobbing

involves hostile and unethical communication, which is directed in a systematic way by one or a few individuals mainly towards one individual who, due to mobbing, is pushed into a helpless and defenseless position, being held there by means of continuing mobbing activities (p. 168).

These activities happen on an almost daily basis and occur for months. Leymann (1996) posits that individuals who are victims of mobbing may experience psychological and physical stress. The result of mobbing is a type of forced termination from a job and may lead to total expulsion from the labor market—in this study’s case, leaving the ministry altogether.

Zapf et al. (1996), in their study of 149 mobbing victims, showed that “mobbing leads to severe health consequences” (p. 233). More than half of their sample received medical treatment as a result of mobbing activities, and more than half had had three or more periods of sick leave during the previous 12 months. Leymann (1996) reveal some of the following mobbing activities that people may experience at work: (1) silencing by those in charge and the inability to speak out due to fear, (2) verbal threats and other verbal activities that keep a person from doing their job effectively, (c) isolation from other people in the organization, (d) ridicule, (e) gossip or rumors, (f) being given meaningless tasks, and (g) being harassed in a threatening way.

Leymann’s (1996) work on mobbing is closely related to work on forced termination among clergy. Greenfield (2001) discusses the systematic way in which a few individuals in a church were responsible for harassing ministers in such a way that they were forced to leave.

Barfoot et al. (2005) describes forced termination as a psychological attack against a minister in order to force a resignation. It is the position of the author that the process of forced termination involves what Leymann (1996) describes as mobbing inasmuch as it occurs over a period of time, results in the expulsion of the minister from the church, and has negative effects. Multiple experiences of forced termination may lead to clergy choosing to leave the ministry altogether. Researchers do not know how forced termination may affect the spouse of a minister. Very little empirical knowledge of how clergy experience forced termination exists. With that in mind, this project attempts to uncover processes that clergy and their spouses may go through while experiencing a forced termination.

Methodology

Participants

Participants for this study were a self-selected subset of a previous study conducted by the author. At the end of the previous study's survey, participants were invited to participate in an interview about their experience with forced termination. There were 21 couples who agreed to be interviewed. The subset included both clergy and their spouses. They were between the ages of 25 and 54, 91 % White, 6 % African American, and 3 % "other." Most of the sample were senior pastors (45 %), 21 % were associate pastors and 6 % were youth pastors; the remaining 28 % were comprised of other staff pastors, evangelists, and "other." Twenty percent of the participants were Assembly of God and 20 % were Baptist, 12 % were non-denominational, and the remaining 48 % were comprised of Church of Christ, Church of God, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, and "other." Twenty one couples were interviewed for the study. The analysis of the interviews stopped at 14 couples because of saturation, as explained below, and the stories of four couples were selected for use in this article with their names and other specifically identifying information changed. The four couples are introduced here.

Pete and Pamela are married with three children. Pete served first as the associate pastor and then as the senior pastor of the church that he and his family were forced from. Their children were involved in school and other community activities.

Jason and Janine are married with two young children; a third passed away before this interview took place. Jason served as the senior pastor of the church that he and his family were forced to leave. It was during the time his third child was dying from untreatable cancer that the church board "became unhappy with the situation."

Bob and Barbara are married with three children. Bob served as the senior pastor of a church he and his family was forcibly terminated from. Two of his children were living at home during that time. After Bob reprimanded another pastor on staff, "things changed."

Sam and Sara are married with two boys, one of whom was diagnosed with autism. Sam, at the time of the project, was a children's and Christian education pastor. Sam had been serving on the staff of the church for about 90 days when Sam "felt like something was going on." Shortly after that, he and his family were forced from their position in the church.

Procedure

As stated above, the participants in this study were a self-selected subset of a larger study conducted by the author. Participants who self-selected into this study received an email inviting them to participate in an interview about their forced termination experience. Further, because this particular sample was difficult to identify, snowball sampling was utilized by asking participants to forward information about the study to others they knew who had experienced forced termination. Because this study utilized a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), it was important to develop a questionnaire based on what is known about forced termination. Since there have been no other qualitative studies published on the topic, the author utilized quantitative data from a previous study to develop the interview questionnaire for this study. Fifteen questions were prepared for the interview. The first question was general in nature and asked participants to “tell me about your forced termination experience.” The following questions were used to clarify the participant’s experience or to uncover similar processes of forced termination. For example, all participants were asked to discuss their experience of the day they “resigned.” Quantitative data from previous studies conducted by the author show that clergy who have experienced a forced termination may have actually “resigned” under duress. Participants in the project were contacted via telephone or email in order to set up either a phone or face-to-face interview with the ministry couple. Phone participants were read a statement concerning research on human subjects and asked to verbally consent to being a participant in the study. Participants in face-to-face interviews were given the consent form and asked to sign it, affirming their participation. Interviews lasted about 1 h and were audiotaped and transcribed.

Qualitative approach and analysis

Grounded theory is a qualitative approach to research developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) that helps the researcher to “learn from the participants [and] to understand a process or situation” (Richards and Morse 2007, p. 60). As the literature would suggest, forced termination is a process and happens over a period of time. Richards and Morse (2007) indicate that the researcher should have the perspective that change is constant and negotiable in regards to the phenomenon or event being studied; therefore, active inquiry with “an emphasis on detailed knowledge, constant comparison, and the trajectory of the event” (p. 61) is vital to the project. Using grounded theory as a framework for collecting and analyzing data, this project made use of semi-structured interviews with both clergy and spouses.

One goal when using a grounded theory approach is to achieve saturation with the data, and this is achieved “when categories are well defined and no new variation [is] discovered” (Weaver et al. 2005). The analysis was well detailed and saturated after 14 couple interviews (Creswell et al. 2007).

The main strategies for analyzing data in grounded theory are comparative. Transcriptions were open coded, memoed, categorized, and integrated (Richards and Morse 2007); notes were made during interviews and memos were created afterwards; and all of this information was used to construct a theory of forced termination. During the analysis, a timeline was constructed using the information from the interviews. Constructing the timeline is beneficial in comparing participants’ experiences in an effort to uncover a process that is similar for all who go through a forced termination. The analysis of the transcribed interviews is meant to

provide new insight into the process and experience of forced termination among couples where at least one individual is in vocational ministry.

Results

The process of forced termination uncovered by this study is presented below. The stories of the four couples presented in this section were selected because they best represent the analysis of the data. It could be noted that any of the 14 couples could have been chosen for inclusion in this article for they all experienced forced termination in very similar ways. Based on the data, they all experienced a honeymoon period, then perceived an initial betrayal by someone they trusted, and later faced subsequent harassment by that individual and/or others in the church. Although each couple ended their relationship with the church in a slightly different way, their experiences, in sum, were very similar. The process lasted between 4 months and 2 years.

Honeymoon

Each couple discussed a period of time when they first arrived at the church when everything seemed to be great and there seemed to be genuine excitement of both the couple and the church, centered on the start of their ministry at the church.

Pete and Pamela described the beginning of their ministry at the new church as exciting but slightly different than the other couples. Pete had been on staff at his church for several years and was hired with the express purpose of taking over when the current senior pastor retired. Pete and the current senior pastor had worked very closely together for several years. When the senior pastor was ready to retire, the church board, the congregation, and everyone in leadership had a plan for the transition. The polity of this church was such that there was no congregational vote required to hire a minister; the board made the decision with “relational buy-in” from the church. Pete was to become the new senior pastor of First Church. The first year or so was not an easy adjustment to the new role, but there were relatively few problems to deal with. Pete and Pamela’s ‘honeymoon’ lasted about a year and a half.

Jason and Janine described the beginning of their ministry at Second Church as a very exciting time in their life. They had made the move across the country back to their home state on the West Coast. The church seemed to be a perfect fit for them. They loved the community and their children loved their new school and made friends quickly with other children in the church. They were voted in with nearly 100 % of the congregational vote. Everything went well the first several years that Jason and Janine pastored Second Church. The church was growing with new families; there were vibrant ministries for all age groups reaching out to the community. Jason and Janine thought they had found the perfect fit for a long-term ministry. Jason and Janine’s honeymoon lasted about 5 years.

Bob and Barbara had a bit of an unconventional start to their ministry at Third Church, but it was not unusual given their family situation. They were called to their church in the middle of the school year, and Barbara was a schoolteacher. Because one of their daughters was a senior in high school, they along with the church board decided that Barbara would stay behind to finish the school year with their daughter while Bob would go ahead and move with their youngest son to Third Church. Their oldest daughter was an adult but still living at home; she was pregnant out of wedlock and also stayed behind with Barbara until the baby was born. According to Bob, the board was aware of and sympathetic to their oldest daughter’s

pregnancy. In the ministry family home, having an unwed child who is pregnant or has fathered a child is looked down upon. However, Bob emphasized that one of the board members had had a similar experience and said to Bob, “Ministry families are just like everyone else, they have the same ‘problems’ everyone else has.” In the interview, Bob remarked that this comment made him feel normal and welcomed, given his family’s circumstances. Bob and Barbara were presented to the congregation as pastors-elect, voted on by the congregation, and received a majority vote as the new pastors. Bob and Barbara’s honeymoon lasted about 1 year.

Sam and Sara thought they had made a smooth transition to Fourth Church, where he was to be the children’s pastor. Although they felt the transition went well, only 90 days after they arrived they knew the honeymoon was over.

Betrayal

After the honeymoon period, all of the study participants experienced a conflict with someone who attended the church or with another pastor on staff. Typically, the description of this conflict emerged as a type of betrayal.

Pete stated that he had no real plans to make any major changes once he took over as the senior pastor. He and his family were happy in the church and the community. However, once he became senior pastor, his previous position needed to be filled. He worked with the board and several influential members of the congregation to hire a new associate pastor. The relationship between Pete and the new associate seemed to go well for the first several months until Pete heard the associate pastor was telling others in the congregation of his desire to be the senior pastor. Pete confronted the relatively new associate about the allegations and learned that they were true. The associate pastor thought he could do a better job at pastoring the church than Pete. Over the previous several months, the new associate had been meeting with influential leaders in the church about Pete and Pamela’s leadership. The associate pastor had been telling these influential leaders that Pete was a poor manager of church finances and responsibilities. Both Pete and Pamela were shocked and heartbroken over the situation, as Pamela had quickly become a friend of the new associate pastor’s wife.

Jason and Janine thought their new life and ministry was perfect until their middle son was diagnosed with cancer when he was 7 years old. Jason, Janine, their family, and the church that had become their family were heartbroken. Young John was a vibrant child and loved being a part of the ministry as much as his parents did. He would often go on hospital visits with his parents to visit congregation members who were patients. He would go with his dad to visit the elderly and those who were unable to come to church for one reason or another. At first, everyone was supportive of the new schedule Jason and Janine needed as they cared for their young child and took him to chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Jason remarked how one board member, who had become a close friend, was instrumental in meeting with the other board members in recommending a sabbatical and new preaching schedule for Jason during this time. The board made a recommendation to Jason that he preach only on Sunday mornings and take care of the essential responsibilities of the church; all other preaching and ministry responsibilities could be delegated to the other ministers on staff. After only a few months of this new schedule, Jason heard that this same board member had been telling others in the church that “our pastor is not taking care of his responsibilities and we should not be paying someone not to be here.” Jason and Janine were crushed.

Bob and Barbara moved their entire family to their new church home and community during the summer. They were enjoying their time, and the rest of the family was becoming quickly acclimated to their new roles. The new school year began. Ben, their middle-school son, attended the church's school. He previously had a little trouble adjusting to the move in the middle of the previous school year but did as well as any young pre-teen moving to a new school. This year the family hoped it would be different as he had the summer to make new friends. One day Ben overheard the principle of the school (the board member who was sympathetic) and his teacher talking negatively about his dad. When they saw him, they made a comment directly to him about how "his dad better get his family under control because the Bible says a man that cannot control his family cannot be a leader." The board members' conversation was directed at Ben's trouble acclimating to the mid-year move and their unwed daughter who now had a child of her own. Bob was concerned to hear this and even more concerned that two adults would say such a thing to his young son. He confronted the two about this conversation and was met with similar remarks about what a "horrible father [he was] and a father who couldn't deal with his family had no business being the pastor of a church." Bob and Barbara remarked that they felt betrayed.

Sam was betrayed by the senior pastor of his church. At Sam's 90-day evaluation, the pastor said to him, "Things had better change drastically or I'll be forced to make a change." Sam was shocked by this statement as he had had very little time at the new church to do anything or make very many close connections. Sam asked the pastor what specifically it was about his performance that people were unhappy about. When he pressed for information, the pastor was "very ambiguous" and would only say, "There are people that have expressed displeasure." The pastor was never specific about who the people were or what was causing the dissatisfaction. Sam was told he had 1 month to remedy things. Sam and Sara felt disillusioned. Sam asked the pastor again who the people were, and again "the pastor was very vague about what people were unhappy." Sam remarked during the interview that he felt like it may have been the pastor's wife that was unhappy. She was the Sunday school teacher for Sam and Sara's middle child who had been diagnosed with autism. The pastor's wife had mentioned to Sara that her son was difficult and that "maybe they should put him in a place equipped to deal with those kinds of children."

Betrayal is common among the stories of the participants who experienced forced termination. Many of them felt betrayed by people whom they initially trusted unequivocally—a leader in the church, a prominent member, or another staff member. This feeling of betrayal was common among the interviewed. They felt as if the people they had trusted most, cared about the most, had "stabbed [them] in the back." This betrayal was followed by a period of harassment by the betrayer and a small group of church members.

Harassment

The harassment that Pete and Pamela received was similar to that experienced by all the other participants. In their case, the associate pastor (the betrayer) started holding official board meetings without Pete's knowledge, and the associate pastor's wife started holding unofficial meetings with other women in the church. Pete and Pamela's assessment of these meetings were that "they were spreading lies about my husband and me. He [the associate pastor]

thought he could do a better job as the senior pastor.” This group of people stopped paying their tithe to the church. The tithe (a tenth of one’s income) is given to church. The tithe and additional offerings are used to pay bills, salaries, and propagate the Gospel. Instead, these people were giving money directly to the associate pastor. This action made it impossible for Pete and Pamela to receive their contracted salary. With no income, they quickly found it impossible to pay their own bills and put food on the table for their children. In addition to the financial difficulties they faced, they experienced psychological bullying by this group in the church: handwritten notes on their car telling them what horrible people they were, and terrible rumors spread around town about their children. One of their children was a cheerleader for the high school football team. Once very popular, the rumors that were spread by this group of adults led to her being ostracized as a “slut” at school.

Jason and Janine also experienced harassment. The leadership of the church began “talking to people about me not being at the church and saying I wasn’t doing my job.” In reality, Jason was doing exactly what the church board had allowed him to do because Jason and Janine were caring for their dying son. Janine began hearing rumors about her husband, about “the horrible pastor he was.” People eventually started coming to her directly making negative statements about her husband and his handling of church business. Janine remembered

feeling like [I] was being attacked from all sides, not only was I dealing with my dying son, but my husband was stressed out because of the problems he was facing at the church, and now people at the church were saying these horrible, horrible things about our family.

It was not long after the harassment that their son died of his cancer. No one from the church came to see him in the hospital; no one came to his funeral. Jason and Janine felt like outcasts. Jason remarked,

My son went with me to so many hospital visits for the families in this church. Even when he felt horrible, he went to their children’s birthday parties, and not one of them came to see him in his time of need.

Bob and Barbara were privately and publicly demeaned. Church leaders and a small group of prominent members stopped paying their tithes. Bob said, “The church took a real hit financially.” Despite the financial difficulties, Bob was pressured to hire a new youth pastor. The youth pastor Bob was pressured to hire was the head board member’s son. Bob thought making this hire would provide a bridge for healing, but instead it provided a door for his forced termination.

Sam and Sara’s harassment was directed toward their kids. Specifically, they had one child with autism who was targeted by the pastor’s wife as a problem child. As Sam puts it, the senior pastor “was out to get him” and Sam felt like he constantly had to “look over his shoulder.” The pastor repeatedly called Sam into the office “to talk” and the conversations were always “negative.” During these conversations the senior pastor would intimate that “there are people” who were not happy with his performance at the church. When Sam asked about these other people, the senior pastor refused to identify who they were. Many of the conversations about Sam’s performance involved the behavior of his autistic son. This constant harassment by the senior pastor left Sam anxious and nervous about coming to work each day. Sara found herself feeling depressed about their situation.

Leaving the church

Not only were the ministers in this study being betrayed by people they once trusted and then harassed to the point of being forced to leave the position, but they often were not able to explain to others why they were leaving.

For Pete and Pamela, all of their experiences finally came to a head when one of the board members approached Pete in a public place and told him, “We don’t want you here anymore. If you don’t leave on your own we’ll make it impossible for you to stay.” Pete drafted a resignation letter to the church and read it the following Sunday. When asked if he had given the true reasons for his exit, he said, “I gave a generic resignation. Most of the congregation had very little idea about what was going on.” Both Jason and Janine and Bob and Barbara made similar comments about their resignation from their churches. When the pastor forced Sam to resign, he “was to cut off all ties; [and] had no rights to speak to anyone in the congregation.” Unlike the others, Sam was not allowed to give a public resignation. The senior pastor read a letter to the congregation; Sam was not aware of the content of that letter. He had written a very short generic resignation letter, “about a paragraph,” and submitted it to the pastor. The true reasons for Sam’s leaving were not publicly disclosed to the congregation. Sam had been planning an event for about 5 months that he “was not welcome at.” He said, “My entire family was immediately cut off.” Moreover, when Sam was forced to submit his resignation, the senior pastor handed him a contract that he was forced to sign that limited what he could say about his experience and threatened legal action if he or his wife spoke about it.

Effects of forced termination

Pete and Pamela went through a time of “deep depression.” They did not know what to say to their children. They did not want the negative experiences they had had at the church to “negatively affect their children’s love of God.” This family got behind on several of their house and car payments. For a time, they thought they might lose everything.

Jason and Janine experienced a double loss. At the same time they experienced the loss of their young son, they were forced from their church family whom they had previously grown to love. They mourned both losses. Jason and Janine saw a counselor for a short time to help them with their grief over their son.

Bob and Barbara went through a very difficult time after they were forced to leave. They had bought a house close to the church that they now needed to sell. They had not owned it long enough to build any equity in the home; the housing market was crashing, and they took an enormous financial loss on the house. Bob would eventually see a licensed mental health worker who diagnosed him with major depressive disorder. Bob remembers the counselor saying to him, “Although you don’t meet the criteria, you have symptoms of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder].” All three of Bob and Barbara’s children vowed never to attend a church again. It was almost a year before Barbara could “even think about going to church again.”

Sam’s experience was a “pretty harsh story.” Immediately before being forced to leave the church, there was conflict in their marriage because Sam felt something was going on and his wife felt like he was making “more out of it than it was.” Shortly after the forced termination, there was a period of “I told you so” behavior between Sam and his wife. The lack of income was a source of stress for the entire family. Sam went 3 months before he found employment, and he remembered, “It was tense.” Sam and his family lived near the church they had been

forced from; for months, he said, “[I] avoided the block the church [was on] . . . I never drove down that street; if I got within a block of it, I turned down another street to avoid it.” When asked why he did that, Sam responded, “I was very bitter . . . very, very bitter.” In fact, the experience was bad enough that Sam carried over his bitterness into the next position, which made it difficult for him to stay long. Further, for a year after leaving the church his children wanted to know why they could not be with their friends and why they could not go to “their church”; this was especially difficult for his autistic son. Sam also described health changes he experienced during the period. “I had put on a ton of weight. . . . I was stressed to the hilt and just couldn’t handle things.”

Discussion

Previous studies show that 25 % of Christian ministers experience a forced termination at least once during their career (Barfoot et al. 2005; Crowell 1992, 1995). Forced termination of clergy is a problem that may be more serious than some are willing to admit. Carroll (2000) states that the numbers of new people entering the ministry are relatively flat and indicates that those numbers may fall in coming years. As previously stated, little is known about forced termination among clergy; few empirical research projects exist on the subject and many Christian churches and organizations find the subject taboo. Perhaps the rate of forced termination is actually much higher, but Christian organizations are unwilling to admit there is a problem and to work with researchers to understand it. Perhaps the number of new ministers entering seminary is declining because they are unwilling to risk their own and their family’s health. Perhaps this study offers some insight into the dynamics of the problem of forced termination.

The couples interviewed for the project felt betrayed by someone they initially trusted and in whom they had confided. In fact, in all but one case they had spent a considerable amount of time cultivating these relationships before the betrayal occurred. In all the cases, small groups of people were responsible for the subsequent harassment. Sam and Sara experienced harassment at the hands of the senior pastor. Bob and Barbara experienced harassment by three disgruntled board members. Bob mentioned that the board held meetings without his knowledge where church business was discussed. In Bob’s case, because he was senior pastor, the harassment took different forms; one of the vocal board members said that he was “no pastor” and did not belong in the ministry. Verbal abuse and rumors were used to make him “want to leave.” For Sam and Sara, harassment ensued in order to threaten them and keep them “quiet” so they would “not tell anyone” what had really happened.

The effects of the forced termination were traumatic for each of the couples. None of the four couples engaged in full-time ministry for a period, and several of them pursued professional counseling in order to deal with the experience. Sam was so traumatized by what had happened that he took extra steps to avoid driving down the same street as the church, “not wanting to see it.” Sara took her feelings of betrayal to the next church and was often “fearful” of the same thing happening again (i.e., PTSD re-experiencing). Pete started his own church and took steps to ensure that he would never be betrayed by a board again.

This study shows that although forced termination is a variable process, it has specific commonalities. All the forced terminations began with a betrayal of sorts, referred to as the

“Brutus concept” (Julius Caesar was betrayed by his close and trusted friend Marcus Junius Brutus on March 15, 44 BCE). In Sam and Sara’s experience, threatening and coercive steps were taken to keep the actions a secret and to psychologically limit the recourses of Sam and Sara to cope with the situation.

Forced termination is an issue that must be addressed by ministers, churches, seminaries, and denominational organizations. This project shows that not only is forced termination an issue, but it is a potentially abusive situation that has traumatic effects on those who experience it. It is important that Christian organizations recognize the problem and implement steps to increase awareness and solutions. Local churches and denominations may want to implement training for all those in church leadership. Training should include how to recognize and appropriately deal with conflict and abuse of people in the church. It is important that seminaries include a course in the degree plans for ministers that offer training on dealing with conflict and abuse. Perhaps the most important implication of this research is that governing bodies that oversee many Christian ministers in the United States need to admit this is an issue and take appropriate steps to protect those who are called to serve the Church. Future research should attempt sampling of other members of the clergy family as well members of churches who have forced out a minister.

One limitation of this study is the sample. The study made use of a small convenience sample of couples where at least one individual was in vocational ministry. As a qualitative study, the intent is not to generalize to a population but rather to generalize a phenomenon, in this case forced termination. Although the sample is a convenience sample, its purpose is well served for a qualitative study attempting to uncover a process general to forced termination. In sampling for qualitative research, the goal is to collect, analyze, and make data until a saturation point is reached. Saturation is reached when no new information is being received from participants. The saturation point may be different in every qualitative study; in this study, the saturation point was quite low. After only five interviews the data was becoming highly saturated. This is an indication that, although Greenfield (2001) did not discuss a pattern in forced termination, there actually is a process that is very similar for everyone who is subjected to this experience.

It is also important to note that this study presents only one side of the subjective story, that of the couple. Not having the subjective story of the church/church members who participated in the forced termination is a limitation. Although all the participants in this study felt an individual or a small group from the church initiated the forced termination process, it is possible that the individual or small group perceived the minister or spouse as the major contributor to the forced termination.

One final note about this project is that it would be easy for readers to view this work and others like it as negative and detrimental to the well-known mission of the Christian Church. Although this project brings to light a negative practice that individuals in the Church engage in that is hurtful to couples, the findings of this project are meant to normalize the experience. Normalizing the experience is one way to develop practical solutions for couples and to open a dialogue among researchers, practitioners, and church leaders in an effort to provide resources to curtail such practices. As this dialogue opens, it will be important for researchers to engage churches who have participated in a forced termination in order to understand the process from their perspective.

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