

# Rejected Ministers Find Acceptance and Help

By Jim White, *Editor* the Religious Herald

RICHMOND -- Statistically, a pastor stands a better chance of being fired than a coach in the National Football League. Charles Chandler, executive director of the Ministering to Ministers Foundation, reports more than 20 percent of all pastors will be fired or pushed out of their churches during their careers.

Chandler formed Ministering to Ministers in 1995 after a small group of church leaders forced his resignation as pastor of a Baptist church in Richmond. The foundation offers a five-day wellness retreat where clergy and their spouses meet others in similar circumstances and talk with support staff. A growing number of churches that terminate ministers include the cost of underwriting the retreat in severance agreements.

From the moment a retreat begins, Chandler knows he is fighting the clock. So much needs to be done in such a brief time, he noted. Couples assemble from varied denominational backgrounds, but they have in common the emotional bruises, spiritual scars and psychological pain caused by rejection. "Our first objective is to get them to tell their stories," Chandler said. "They come in with strong feelings of isolation and failure. Telling their stories helps them to know they are not alone. It is amazing how similar their stories are." As each person shares his or her story, others in the group provide that individual with the balm of empathy.

"It is hard to know for sure," Chandler cautioned, "but according to the most reliable information we have, it seems that across denominational lines, about 1,600 ministers per month are being dismissed or forced to resign. "Their trust has been shattered -- and their dreams. They're experiencing doubts about whether there is a place for them in the local church. Will they have to find fulfillment in ministry outside the parish setting?"

Chandler believes more small churches currently are being affected by forced termination because seminary students are being prepared for larger churches by professors who often have little church experience. A small church dominated by members of a single family presents challenges for which many new ministers find themselves unprepared. "Pastors come to these churches looking to make a difference, and they run into the matriarch or patriarch who doesn't want anything to change," he said.

An emerging trend Chandler has observed is music ministers, age-level ministers and others who are forced out of church staff positions by authoritarian pastors who either are insecure and inexperienced or who have adopted the leadership styles of megachurch pastors whom they have chosen as mentors.

Wellness retreats concentrate on helping ministers and their mates understand some of the reasons for their circumstance. "We administer the Myers-Briggs personality type indicator and acquaint them with family-systems theory in order to help them become more self-defined and self-regulated," Chandler said. A therapist always is on hand to

guide discussions and answer questions in the group or privately. For most of the retreats, Ross Campbell -- a psychiatrist from Chattanooga, Tenn., who also is a well-known Baptist author and conference leader -- has volunteered his expertise. Couples who attend the retreats usually have more anger than they have allowed themselves to express or even realize, Chandler said. They have "stuffed it rather than acknowledging it and dealing with it."

Chandler and his Ministering to Ministers associates also seek to meet other objectives. Because many participants feel isolated even from God, the retreats seek to renew a sense of spirituality and reliance on God's presence in their lives. Since they often have been crushed by the power structures in their churches, the ministers have come to distrust and avoid power, he noted. "We use Bob Perry's book *Pass the Power, Please* as the starting point and emphasize that power is simply the ability to get something done," Chandler said. Ministers need to develop a healthy sense of power in themselves and their ministries, Chandler teaches.

Ministering to Ministers also helps teach ministers how to write a resume and prepare for a job interview, and the retreat includes a component designed to demonstrate that ministerial skills are transferable to non-church ministries and secular entities. "This gives hope. Sometimes ministers feel there is nothing else they can do," Chandler said. "And when you feel that you have failed at the only thing you are qualified to do, it takes away the joy of service. It is freeing to realize that you have skills that are transferable to secular positions."

Chandler concedes a few ministers who attend the retreats simply are not well-suited to ministry, and the moral lapses of others -- about 7 percent nationwide -- require dismissal, but he insists most of the ministers with whom he works are gifted ministers. Many, he believes, are even better equipped for ministry following dismissals because they possess greater humility and empathy. Overall, 54 percent of ministers who experience forced termination go back into church staff ministry. Among those who receive help from Ministering to Ministers, the figure rises to about 70 percent, Chandler reported.

"This has not dampened my enthusiasm for ministry. I would not want to discourage anyone from entering ministry, but the expectation that a minister will not face opposition is just not factual. Even in the church, a minister will experience opposition. Jesus' greatest opposition came from religious people."

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