

The Servant

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Forced Termination and Recovery

by William Trimyer, Editor

Recovery from forced termination is a journey, not a destination. Recovery is not about putting everything behind as though it no longer exists. Recovery is a process that requires a lifetime of work. The pain of forced termination lingers in ways we do not anticipate. There is fragileness in the human spirit and the body that responds to the trauma of rejection. Down the road we may see something, hear something, read something, smell something, or have an experience that brings the pain rushing back. Oftentimes the hurt is just under the surface and a “trigger” will cause us to visit that pain once more. If your mother force-fed you green beans as a child, you can walk into a grocery store as an adult and see a pile of green beans and almost throw up!

Our body will talk back to us when we are under stress. The same is true of old injuries. Sometimes it does not require much to feel once again the hurt that tore at our hearts. We may try to kid ourselves into thinking we are done with the past trauma, but the body and the human spirit will remind us that there is still more work to do.

I am reminded how we can bury some old tires and think we are done with those unsightly things. The rains will come and the snow will melt and over the course of time those tires will float back to the surface! Pain has a way of doing that too. It's still there, under the surface, and all it takes is one experience that “floats” those memories to the top.

Recovery at least means getting to the place where we can say “That was then and this is now.” We can remind ourselves that the past does not have to dictate our present or our future. We can also remind ourselves that God is still on our side and loves us through those painful days and will love us even when we do not feel so loveable.

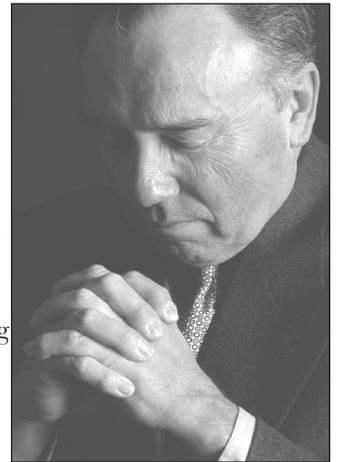
Ministers are notorious for being caretakers of those

who are hurting. Ministers are also notorious for failing to care for themselves. Many ministers will work overtime putting “band aids” on hurting people, all the while bleeding to death themselves. In fact, one could liken a minister to a ‘possum lying on the side of the road bleeding to death with a smile on its face! Ministers often spend their working years running around in a three-piece suit and wearing a “Pepsodent smile.”

Ministers suffering from forced termination oftentimes do not know where to turn for help. Sometimes they are reluctant to seek help. They are quick to dispense “medication” for others who are hurting when they could greatly benefit from intervention. One of the wonderful interventions in the MTM Foundation is the Wellness Retreats. The stories of those who have been helped in these retreats are touching and encouraging.

Recovery may involve for some a trip to their physician for a medical evaluation. We do not need to be reminded that stress and grief can make a midget out

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Ministering to Ministers

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Forced Termination and Recovery

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of a giant. Recovery may also mean entering into a therapeutic relationship to sort through and work on understanding what has happened, determining what might be needed to facilitate the healing process.

Nurturing the injured human spirit may definitely require regular conversations and reflection with the Great Spirit! During the recovery time for forced termination it will be beneficial to lean upon the same faith resources that are often suggested to other

hurting people. Faith must not be placed on the periphery of life, but brought to bear upon the moment of crisis in the minister's life, calling upon those same strengths the minister points to Sunday after Sunday.

Let's not forget that congregations hurt and the family of a minister hurts deeply. These, too, will need support and help as they look for ways to recover from the trauma of isolation and watching the one they love bleeding by the side of life's road.

Forced Termination in 1725!

by Steve McGlamery

"There is nothing new under the sun." So wrote the author of Ecclesiastes. I realized this truth again while reading *The Diary of John Comer*, eighteenth century minister in New England. It may comfort ministers suffering from forced terminations in the twenty-first century to know that what happens to them is not new. Many familiar patterns and dynamics can be seen in Comer's story.

In August 1725, John Comer moved to a town in the Massachusetts Colony called Swanzey (or Swansea) to open a school and assume a church pastorate. He saved himself some grief by observing certain problems before agreeing to a one-year commitment to the church. Comer wrote, "I refused the (one-year agreement) because by some private action... I found some opposition to my settlement...by three persons who appeared free and easy to my face." This sounds familiar, right? The secretive dealings outside the stated church procedures, the small group exerting power over the church, and the two-faced manner of their actions—all typical of forced terminations today.

In 1728, Comer experienced forced termination in Newport, Rhode Island. "About this time," he writes, "I found my people so uncomfortable that we must divide from each other, which was exceeding grievous to me." On this occasion Comer may not have been privy to the behind-the-scenes dealings, thinking that the majority of the church members were behind withholding his salary as a means of forcing him to leave. The editor, Edwin Barrows, of Comer's diary wrote in a footnote, "Two members influential in the body were largely responsible for leading it into

this wrong course." It appears that Comer did not learn enough about the church's condition before going because Barrows reports the church had been weakened by a division between the previous pastor and his assistant. The assistant had left with many members to form a separate congregation. Sound familiar?

Comer experienced many of the emotions that modern ministers report today. Comer found it therapeutic to write about his feelings in his journal, writing that he was "...exceedingly beyond measure almost bowed down and depressed in my spirits about living." He found his "...spirits low even to an extreme, about the affairs of my former flock." This suggests how difficult it is to put the hurt behind. Admitting the depression, though, is the first step in dealing with it.

Such experiences like those that Comer had can also try a person's faith. Comer wrote, "I can't see the end why the holy God is contending with me. I am in much fear about my soul...Lord, I fear I have no oil. Oh, let me know I have oil in my lamp burning brighter." Many MTM participants can echo Comer's prayer.

Comer found himself looking backwards rather than forward, having heard a report from a man who comes to preach to his former flock nine months after his departure. The man comments, "I don't find by him any repentance in them for ill management, neither do I learn any good desires in them."

Comer marked the first anniversary of his dismissal, and then a month later shows some progress in his recovery when he

remarked about a fellow minister's removal from his church, "Though there be troubles yet God's foundation is sure." Yet Comer still struggles with forgiving his wrongdoers when he writes eighteen months later, "Oh that I may be more and more of a forgiving frame of spirit to them who have grievously injured me. I am afraid I don't forgive them as I should from my heart, because I can't bear to speak of their actions without a commotion in my own breast. Lord, help me to forgive them as I expect God for Christ's sake should forgive me."

Comer also found it difficult to overcome his past associations with the place where he was terminated. "I found going into [the church] affected me and brought things into my mind." He continues, "I wish it were not so. Oh yet I may love them and forgive and pray more for them."

Perhaps we can learn from Comer's example and how he reconciled somewhat with the church before he left Newport for a new assignment. He appears to move on with a little less of ill will, ready to engage in his new ministry with a somewhat healed heart. His patience may have allowed him to work through his pain.

No matter how long it takes, broken ministers may find renewal as they journey into recovery through a spirit of forgiveness.

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The Perils of Isolation

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setting to expose their hurt. Through depth of sharing, kiononia develops, competitive wrangling subsides, vision is broadened, and a sense of belonging develops. Decisions that are processed in groups are usually better and healthier. This enables self-confidence and self-esteem to grow.

The late Dr. Hobart Mowrer, professor of psychology at the University of Illinois, experienced severe depression at one time in his life. According to his testimony, neither psychoanalysis nor psychotherapy helped. Finally, in desperation, he confessed some “secret sins” to his wife and to other significant persons in his life. Through honesty, confession, and living responsibly, he embarked upon a pilgrimage to wholeness.

Later, Mowrer noticed that some of his counselees had experiences with characteristics similar to his. He invited these counselees to group meetings and observed how they helped one another more than he was able to help them. His observations were validated through five years of research sponsored by a Lilly Foundation Grant. Out of his experiences and findings, Mowrer founded the Integrity Groups movement.

Mowrer described this movement as “bringing people into community.” My life was enriched through my participation in a formal support group with Dr. Mowrer for about five years prior to his death. He was a treasured mentor and I learned that a Ministers Support Group can be the difference between sanity and insanity.

What are your options if you do not have a formal Ministers Support Group when facing church conflict?

Two years ago, MTM determined to target isolation as a major culprit in ministerial burnout and in the growing epidemic of forced terminations. Utilizing a grant from the Richard Van Lunen Foundation, forty ministers/spouses (most of whom had experienced

Responses From Retreat Participants

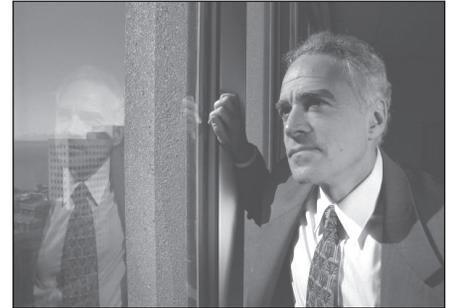
“I just wanted to tell you that I have begun a new position. . . Thank you for all of your prayers, counsel, and support while I made my way through some hard times. You will always be in my prayers and on my mind as I hear of others who have had to go through a similar fate.”

“You all ministered to us in ways that few others could have done at one of the darkest times of our lives. We are most grateful for your gifts to us.”

“If it were not for the MTM Wellness Retreat and the continuing ministry we received from MTM, we would not be in ministry today.”

“It has been three years since we returned from our MTM experience, and we have said many times that it made all the difference in where we are now, not that all things are perfect, but we know God paved the way in healing, so we’d be ready for this new place of service. Thank you.”

forced termination and participated in a Healthy Transitions Wellness Retreat for Ministers and Spouses) as well as other ministers and lay persons with experience working with forced terminations, met in Richmond for a three-day seminar. This project became known as “Friends for the Journey.” These were taught to listen and encourage ministers and their families who are experiencing conflict with their congregation or who are facing forced termination. The responsibility of this trained group is to walk with and be a friend to wounded ministers and their families during such conflict and trauma. During the past two years these “Friends” have walked with over 150 ministers/spouses caught up in the throes of church conflict and/or forced termination.



By addressing the problem of isolation, the wounded minister and his/her family are in a better position to begin the journey of healing. It is an intentional process to bring persons in the midst of isolation to experience community, a community of caring.

MTM Mission Statement

The MTM Foundation seeks to be advocates for clergy and their families in all faith groups who are experiencing personal or professional crisis due to deteriorating employment or congregation-clergy relationships.

Coming soon:

HEALTHY TRANSITIONS

Wellness Retreats for Ministers and Spouses

August 28-September 1, 2006
Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond
Richmond, Virginia
Co-Sponsored by
Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond
Richmond, Virginia

November 13-17, 2006
Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond
Richmond, Virginia
Co-Sponsored by
Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond
Richmond, Virginia

January 8-12, 2007
Carson-Newman College
Jefferson City, Tennessee
Co-sponsored by
Norton Institute for Congregational Health at Carson-Newman College and
Church-Staff Leadership Group, Tennessee Baptist Convention,
Brentwood, Tennessee

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The Perils of Isolation

by Charles H. Chandler, D. Min., Executive Director

Few things in life are worse than feeling isolated. Perhaps that is why most prison systems consider solitary confinement as the severest form of punishment. Isolation from family, friends, and social connections is often a prelude to depression and loss of motivation. Isolation creates a narrowed vision of life and critically affects self-esteem and self-confidence, even if isolation is self-imposed.



DR. CHANDLER

The May 3, 2005 issue of *The New York Times* reported that loneliness is hazardous to a person's health. Researchers at Carnegie Mellon University reported how "...lonely and socially isolated students had weaker immune responses to flu shots than did their more outgoing peers." Led by doctoral student Sarah Pressman, researchers took blood samples to measure circulating antibodies before the inoculation. Samples were taken again one month and again after four months. The report suggested there is evidence that loneliness is associated with poor health behaviors like sleep deprivation and abnormal cardiac function.

Fred Luskin, in his book, *Forgive For Good*, points out that having someone to talk to concerning one's feelings during traumatic times, especially the feelings of rejection, can experience strength through social support. Forgiveness is a process usually achieved by viewing an offense as less personal and disallowing the betrayal to consume too much time and space in one's mind. This process requires considerable time and emotional energy. The pilgrimage towards forgiveness requires processing the painful event and the associated feelings with a friend, therapist, or peer group.

I have observed in church conflicts how ministers and their families are often cut off from their support systems - church leaders, church families, and fellow ministers. Some church members simply do not know what to say or do, so they distance themselves from the minister and his/her family. The problem is compounded when the minister and his/her family begin to withdraw. Feeling betrayed, the minister's trust level plummets. The minister will wonder whom he/she can trust, which can lead the minister to suffer alone in silence.

Introverts may require more private time to process events than extroverts. According to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, extroverts are energized through social interaction and introverts are energized in more isolated settings. Of course, this has little to do with a person's ability to relate to others, such as being a "good mixer." The issue is what energizes people, external or internal factors.

The *Abilene Reporter-News* (December 14, 2000) reported that 60% of ministers say their family's ability to trust church leaders was undermined by church conflict and forced termination. And 70% of the ministers surveyed said they did not have a close friend they could talk with about their problems. Mistrust and isolation further contributes to the casualty of betrayal and rejection.

The above factors play a major part in my advocacy for formal ministers Support Groups. My advocacy is also a result of my own pilgrimage. I have been a part of formal Ministers Support Groups since 1971. It takes a while for trust to grow, but with a commitment to confidentiality and openness, the trust level will deepen as the participants recognize the group

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Offering C.A.R.E. for Caregivers

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