

Saturday, July 31, 2010

[Are We Killing Off Our Ministers?](#)



*"I've never seen a time when preachers have been treated so badly."*

*--Denominational official*

I sat in a room this past week with 13 ministers and their spouses. They had come from all over the country. The thread that tied them all together was that they had all been dismissed from the churches they had served. Some were young, just starting out—some were grey-haired and in their sixties. Some had been Senior Pastors and some had been on some church's staff.

It was a week of pain and heartbreak. Tears ran down our faces as we heard story after story of abuse, betrayal and trumped-up charges. It wasn't that all those that gathered were perfect—some had made terrible mistakes. Some had been naïve and thought this would never happen to them. A couple after serving for almost a decade in one place found themselves swept away casually as if all those years and work did not matter.

The toll on their lives has been enormous. Marriages have suffered. Finances have taken a nosedive. Their children have lost their stable base and find themselves uprooted from friends and schools and familiarity. Some families have been left without hospital insurance. Churches are fragmented, lost members and left weak by the action of some little group in their church. The depression in that circle last week was formidable.

A therapist offered advice. A spiritual director pointed the way. We had lawyers, nutritionists, and business folk to talk about resumes. Those gathered took a personality type assessment and received personal counseling. Most of the leaders of this retreat had been through a similar experience of dismissal and termination.

We scattered on Friday afternoon. They were all going back to what they had left—children wondering about the future and houses that needed to be put on the market. They were men and women ministers who had no idea what the future held. But they went away with a hope they had found in some who had walked that way and come out on the far side. They had discovered

some handles of where they might go for help. There were phone numbers to call and people to talk with that would understand.

The best statistics tell us that 1600 ministers are dismissed or forced to resign every month. In 1996 Leadership Magazine pointed out that 22.8% of all ministers will be forced out before their careers end. 67% of those affected will face forced termination more than once. The Barna Institute says that a US pastor is forced out every six minutes.

I left that retreat thinking that I wished that lay-people could sit in that room and listen to the stories and hear the pain that churches cause. I wish they could ponder the collateral damage: clergy families forced to deal with financial and vocational crises, their children watching from the sidelines and wondering about the pain their parents feel, the depression that falls like a fog on these pastors and their families not to speak of the erosion of trust and love that should flow from churches.





Surely there must be a better way to resolve conflict. Outside the city of Oxford, England about three miles away you come to the village of Iffley. [The Church, St. Mary of the Virgin](#) dates back to 1170 AD. It is one of the finest examples of Romanesque architecture in England. I walked inside that church and on the wall in the narthex is a large wooden board. Written across the top was the message: Incumbents (ministers) who have served this parish. Underneath were the names and years of those that served the congregation. The first Priest mentioned began in 1170. Every minister's name was mentioned from 1170 to 1279. Then there was a gap and in 1432 the names began again and are listed to the present. Many of those vicars had served for over fifty, sixty years. I know that arrangement for calling priests and ministers was far different from our own—but I thought of that wall and all those names as I drove away home from that retreat.

The Barna Institute has reported that ministers who stay ten years are more are likely to have their most effective years as Pastors. Surely we must find a way to deal with the hard side of church life than just dismissing ministers and staff persons and starting over again. Sometimes this is necessary—but 1600 dismissals every month? Did Christ have this in mind when he told Peter: “Upon this rock I will build my church?”

*(The above photographs are from St. Mary the Virgin Church in Iffley, England.)*

*(The organization that sponsored this retreat is called, fittingly, Ministering to Ministers. This particular retreat was the 95th retreat they have held throughout the country. Over 918 persons have come through these retreats from 36 denominations from the US, Canada and the Bahamas. MTM offers a helping hand at no charge to these persons who come to these retreats. You can find out more about MTM through their web site, <http://www.mtmfoundation.org/>, or contacting the Executive Director, Charles Chandler at 1-804-594-2556.)*

Posted by Roger Lovette at [10:45 AM](#)  

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