

From: MTM Foundation [mtmfoundation@verizon.net]
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To: mtmfoundation@verizon.net
Subject: Stunned: "I, I, I don't want to resign."



Ministering to Ministers Foundation, Inc. Newsletter
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In This Issue

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Two Phone Calls that Saved My Life

I grew up in the Episcopal Church -- infant baptism, Sunday school, Vacation Bible School. I memorized the Nicene Creed before it was 'required' for teenage confirmation; I wore hats, white gloves, and a crinoline slip under my Sunday dresses. Father West was my priest growing up - and somehow I knew he loved me in a way that was profound and forever and different than the other ways I was loved as a child. My memories of church are very, very good -- the kind of good that helps to 'grow us up' so that we want what is good for others when we're adults.

I'm now a priest in the Episcopal Church, and the rector of my own parish, which includes children who stand on a wood box by the altar on Sundays so they can see during Eucharist, hopefully learning in the process some of what formed me into the person I am. I have been ordained for twelve years, following my first vocation in education. I began my professional life as a junior high school teacher, and then earned a Ph.D. in Health Sciences, only eventually to leave a solid career as a university department chair and professor in order to go to seminary and pursue ordination.

Life has been good to me. Not perfect of course-we all know that life is never without its ups and downs; like most folks I know, I've had my share. And I've tasted my own bits and pieces of injustice, especially as a girl who grew up as an aspiring athlete before Title Nine. These also include being intentionally hit by a truck during graduate school in Illinois and being left for dead in a snow bank. Through it all, the church, however, was the place that told me unequivocally that I was a person of value, and that God really loved me, no matter what.

And then one day I was crushed. Without warning, the church that 'grew me up' turned on me and I experienced a cruelty at the hands of my church that was as painful as living through the truck accident years ago.

It was a Wednesday morning, 7:00 a.m., in early October. I was the Associate

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[MTM Website](#)

What's MTM all about?

Our Mission:

The Ministering to Ministers (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.

Upcoming Retreats

November 15-19, 2010

Geneva Camp & Retreat Center
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Nov. 29 - December 3

Baptist Theological Seminary
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January 10 - 14, 2011

Carson Springs
Newport, Tennessee

Contact us:

Charles H. Chandler, D.Min.
Executive Director
Ministering to Ministers
Foundation, Inc.
2641 Cromwell Road

Rector in my fourth year of ordained ministry in a program-size church. Each week the rector (senior minister) and I met with the two senior lay leaders of the congregation. On this morning, the rector cleared his throat and said, "Nancy Lee, I have something very hard to say to you (long pause) ... WE want you to resign." As I sit here and type those words, and recall that morning, my chest tightens up and that moment hovers like a bad dream.

"I, I, I don't want to resign" - I remember stammering, my childhood stuttering overtaking me. "You don't have a choice - it would be better for you if you resigned rather than ...," and the silent option was left dangling in the air. Swiftly, numerous unrecognizable accusations were laid out like a good hand of poker -- but I had no cards. I wasn't even sure what game we were playing. I was allowed no defense. There was no process of appeal. I was simply told that I was no longer wanted, that I had nothing more to offer, and that my contact with my parishioners, including the youth group I had just accompanied on a mission trip to the Navajo Nation, was as of that moment terminated. "You should consider returning to teaching or something ... you should never have been a parish priest," said the man who up until that morning I had considered my colleague in ministry, with whom I was yoked together to share in the challenges of ministering to the needs of our parish. These were the last words spoken to me before I was told to turn in my keys, to leave the building within thirty minutes without packing up anything from the office, and never to return to the property again.

I got up and walked the twenty feet down the hall to my office. I stood there looking out the window - then at my books, lining shelf after shelf, filled with assiduously highlighted pages and notes in the margins - then my desk, my appointment book, open and filled in with the names of people with whom I was in holy relationship, for I was their priest. They were my people. Across the hall was the office of the youth director whom I admired and had mentored.

I left by the back door. I never set foot on the property again.

I got in my car and somehow drove to the Diocesan headquarters and walked into the office of what we call the Canon to the Ordinary, the Bishop's chief assistant. She got up, looked at my face and simply said, "He did it". And as I sat there -- stunned to know the rector had already announced to others his intention to find a way to "get rid" of me -- the fax machine in her office piped up with a release statement for me to sign, purchasing my silence in exchange for a small financial severance package. Many, I learned, don't get even that.

I had been told that the vestry (the board) of the parish had "voted unanimously to ask me to leave," although later I was to discover that the first they heard of my departure was when the rector later announced my sudden 'resignation'. The parish was told that I had left abruptly and unexpectedly, in effect abandoning them without warning. I was not allowed to say good-bye -- to staff, vestry members, even to the children and youth, who were brutally blindsided by the news.

I was not the only one never to go back. The families of several children and teens were to leave the parish in outrage over my treatment, and theirs, and to this day most of them have not been back to church at all. It took months for the truth of what happened to slowly leak out, and then years for the parish to fully recover. I did, eventually, receive a personal apology from one of the two lay leaders who had been witness to my termination that day, saying that he had been an unwilling participant who did not really understand or agree with what was being done, but felt he had no choice but to back the rector's unexpected, unilateral announcement of my departure.

I have never seen nor heard from the rector since that day. Soon afterwards, he left that parish himself for a church on the west coast, from which he 'resigned' suddenly just a couple of years later; he subsequently turned up selling high-end real estate, following what his new web site describes as a "twelve year sojourn in the non-profit world." I have no knowledge of what happened in his last parish, other than the fact that both he and his new assistant vanished from their church website one week, and three years later the church still hasn't hired a permanent rector.

In the days, weeks, and months that followed my termination, I spent hours and hours sitting in silence - feeling empty, broken, beaten, beaten-up. I took a

Richmond, VA 23235

Cathy Ralcewicz
Ministry Assistant and
Director of Development

Linda Serreno
Development Assistant

mtmfoundation@verizon.net

Phone (804) 594-2556

FAX (804) 897-4728

Editor: David Al Myers

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financial hit that I'll probably never fully recover from, having to sell my house and exhaust my savings. I was treated for post-traumatic stress. Slowly I was nursed back to health, with the love of my family, friends, former parishioners who still believed in my calling, the man who was to become my husband, and some courageous colleagues - including a retired Episcopal bishop who encouraged me to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" everything I could get my hands on about Family Systems, workplace bullying, and narcissistic personality disorders.

Two phone calls were pivotal in my time of recovery. The first was from a priest whom I knew only indirectly, but who had suffered his own indignities at the hands of my former 'boss'. Nearing retirement, he was serving a loving, family-size parish nearby, and he told me that he was determined that my termination was not going to mean my losing my vocation as a priest; so he said he would literally split his already small salary with me if I would come to work with him at his rural, colonial era Episcopal Parish. I did, and then I followed him as Interim Rector there as I began my search for the next phase of my journey.

If Chris's call helped save my vocation, a call from Bev Buston, a member of MTM 's board of directors, helped to save my soul. She invited me to a weeklong retreat for persons who had been "involuntarily terminated," and convinced me in the midst of my pain and shame to attend. It hurt to have been reduced to that - someone terminated against my will. The whole situation I had been thrust into felt dirty ... I felt ashamed, embarrassed. But I went.

There I heard the stories of my (mostly) Protestant brothers on retreat with me. We listened and talked and then carried each other's stories to our rooms, to our prayers ... tasting and sharing our common emotions of rage and betrayal, our experiences of abandonment, dreams stomped into dust.

And then one day there was the slightest glimmer of light, and I actually slept for the first time in quite a while for four whole hours in a row. Slowly I felt the murmurings of prayer bubbling up from that once familiar place. And I saw the face of Christ in those on retreat with me, who had suffered much and who still loved God, as I did; who still wanted to love others, in the name of God, as I did. We took, together, our first steps towards reclaiming our callings, while being massaged with the palpable wisdom and compassion of the MTM retreat leaders, teachers and guides. They saved my life. And because of all these people, I learned to begin again to trust that God loved us all, no matter what, and wasn't finished with any of us yet, either.

My hope is that others of you who have found healing like this will share your own stories, so others may be saved from despair, and by the grace of God find again their vocational paths as ministers of God, who is making all things new.

The Rev. Dr. Nancy Lee Jose
MTM Board of Directors

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