

Forced Terminations

Is There A Rulebook On Forced Terminations?

By Charles H. Chandler, Executive Director, Ministering To Ministers Foundation, Inc.

After facilitating a session of participants' stories at a Healthy Transitions Wellness Retreat, I was asked, "Is there a rulebook on forced termination?" He had observed the similar "dynamics" or "rules" in the stories. At every retreat the participants are amazed at the similarities in the forced termination experience.

Several years ago, the psychiatrist assisting with a retreat was appalled as he heard the stories. He worked extensively with corporations in "downsizing" and noted that none of them treated employees like the churches treated the retreat participants. He observed three "dynamic" patterns in all of their stories.

First, each minister had been "blind-sided."

A group of two or three persons, usually self-appointed, approached the minister without warning and said he/she should resign because of loss of effectiveness. They convinced the minister that the whole church shared their feeling. The "group" presented themselves as merely "messengers" and insisted there was nothing personal about the request. The messengers told the minister they loved him/her and really hated to deliver the resignation request.

Second, while the minister was in a state of shock after being "blindsided," the "group" dumped guilt on the minister. They said the resignation and related conversation must be kept very quiet. If word got out, it could split the church. And, the minister would not want to be known as one who caused a split church! Any negative effect from the minister's leaving was dumped directly on him/her as though a minister could just slip away and never be missed.

Third, while the minister was still in no condition to make a decision of any kind, the group pressed for a decision. In most cases, a few weeks or a few months of severance was offered - provided the resignation was given immediately and the entire conversation kept quiet.

The "messengers" added, "We have to know what you plan to do, because if you refuse to resign or if you talk to other church members, we will take away the severance and call a church business meeting to fire you. Then you will get nothing."

Again, the minister was told there was nothing personal about the request. They had to do what was best for the church. No reasons were given for the forced termination except that the church needed new, more effective leadership.

I have worked with hundreds of ministers who have experienced forced termination. At this point, I have decided a rulebook is floating around out there somewhere and it does suggest that a few disgruntled church members can follow the above listed rules and "kick the preacher out." I've never seen it in writing, but its effectiveness can be seen in case after case.

Look with me at some of the fallacies and undesirable ethics endorsed by this phantom rulebook. Though the "messengers" present themselves as representing the vast majority of the membership, according to a survey conducted by Leadership magazine, 43 percent of forced-out ministers said a "faction" pushed them out, and 71 percent of those stated that the "faction" numbered 10 persons or less. The self-appointed "messengers" often horde the inside information, because only 20 percent of the forced out ministers said the real reason for their leaving was made known to the entire congregation. *

Frequently, the decision is made by an informal clique without authority. And, I am convinced the statement telling the minister to remain quiet or risk losing severance money translates, "we do not have the votes to remove the minister via a church vote."

Ministers often remain quiet because they are afraid to take a chance on having nothing with which to house and feed their families. A significant number of ministers have no savings due to inadequate salaries. They often fall victim to the "group's" argument that remaining quiet is taking the "high road".

Remaining quiet also creates dynamics that make it easy for the church to become a repeat-offender church. The next time a small but vocal group is dissatisfied with the minister, the same old rulebook is consulted and another minister is forced out. Disclosing the secret may be painful, but it is the only way a church is able to stay or become healthy.

As much consideration should be given to leaving a position as is given to accepting a position. Otherwise, the Lord's leadership has little opportunity to guide the process. A minister does not owe a self-appointed "faction" an on-the-spot answer. Time for prayer and processing with confidants or mentors is vital. Certainly, ministers have the right to take adequate time for healthy decision making.

The bottom line, as I see it, in dealing with the forced termination process is clear-cut and well defined. Written or unwritten effective rules or dynamics are in place to force a minister out. However, this process is done in secret and without proper notification or concern.

On the other hand, MTM offers effective procedures and professional guidance to help ministers and churches move toward healthier decision-making. I know, without a doubt, achieving the latter is worth the time and effort it requires.

* David L. Goetz, "Forced Out," Leadership, (Carol Stream, IL: Volume XVII Number 1, Winter 1996) p.42.

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