

# Clear your desk!

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When a pastor is forced out

We tend to think of America as the place of the ‘hire and fire’ culture – sadly we have the same kind of culture in some UK churches.

A 2008 US study reckoned that around 23% of pastors have either had their contracts terminated or been forced to resign. At present, through my work with Pastors’ Academy, I am aware of a number of pastors who were forced out of churches in this country over the summer months. Legally it is not as easy to sack people these days – especially if they dig their heels in. But nevertheless, it is possible to make life so difficult for a pastor that he simply feels he has to hand in his resignation.

Obviously, there are some situations where a man should resign. If he has lost his faith, fallen into unrepentant gross sin or has begun to propound unbiblical teachings he ought to go. But in the majority of cases the root of the problem is nothing so serious. Most often the reason men are told they are unwanted is to do with personality clashes in the leadership team, the ‘style’ of ministry, deteriorating health, interpretations of safeguarding rules or the church just itching for change. Such problems ought to be handled reasonably, graciously and amicably, but often they are not.

## **Trauma for pastors**

To be told by the church or its leadership to 'clear your desk' and 'we want you out', leaves a pastor traumatized. It is a terrible shock to his system.

Often these situations blow up fairly quickly, over a matter of just weeks sometimes. Sometimes the decision has been made behind the scenes without him being aware. And suddenly the world with which he is familiar is shattered. He feels devastated, alone and angry.

The time, effort and love he has poured into the church evidently count for nothing. His confidence is shot. He will doubt himself and his abilities. 'After all,' he thinks, 'I'm being treated as if I am the problem with the church.' He will find it difficult to preach or prepare another sermon.

If his departure has been previously talked through and engineered by other leaders he will feel betrayed by men he thought were his friends. He has no-one to turn to except God.

But at just this point he may well have a crisis of faith. He feels he has been treated so badly by those who profess to follow the loving Lord Jesus. Is this Christianity in practice? Darkness invades his thinking. Has he been fooling himself all these years? Is this Christianity really true? God seems far away.

At such a time he will certainly need friendship – perhaps the friendship of another pastor from another church.

## **Attitudes of leaders**

Lay elders or those in the leadership team often do not cover themselves in glory when a faction in the church turns against the pastor. If it is a very vociferous minority the elders can be bamboozled. The research says that a ginger group for removing a pastor usually numbers 10 or fewer people even in a larger church.

Some reasons why the elders are ambivalent or fail to give good support to a pastor can be as follows:

- Many lay elders these days are from a business background and tend to have a 'hire and fire' attitude to pastors. They are pragmatists. They don't really include the pastor and his wife in the 'family' of the church. He is easily dispensable and replaceable.
- Such leaders coping with secular jobs as well as church commitments, are usually very busy men with pressurized lives. They can be, what I term, 'armchair elders'. Their focus tends to be on the decision making of the elders' meeting not on being among the people to care for them. They are managers rather than shepherds. For such men under pressure, to give in to the dissatisfied is the easy way out and they take it.

- For the leadership team of a church that is not doing well, to blame the lack of success on the pastor by supporting his removal, shifts any blame from themselves for the church's condition.
- A group of armchair elders are only concerned that the church should grow numerically. Depth of fellowship and such virtues as loyalty to a pastor are not so much on their agenda.

I think it is the experience of most pastors who are forced out that the congregation is rarely told about the real reason for his resignation. There is a cover-up by other leaders. Here non-disclosure clauses in a pastor's contract can be used in not only a less than Christian way but an abusive way. I have even heard of a church being told to contact the pastor to say 'thank you' for his ministry but they were not to ask him the reasons why he was leaving. The façade of the loving church was used to hide a rather different reality.

Different forms of 'blackmail' can be used on the pastor to hush things up. Here are a couple of lines that can be used. 'Everyone knows it is easier to get a new job if you have a job – so get on with looking for a new position before you have to go.' Or again, 'Please don't force us to have to take this to a church meeting and so risk division among the congregation.'

Not all elders are like this. Some will support a pastor under pressure. But many do not.

### **Fall out for families**

The consequences for a pastor's family when he is forced out are serious.

The family has to move on. The children will likely have to change schools. But what if they have just begun at secondary school or are just coming up to 'A' levels? Should the pastor and his wife try to stay in the area, in order to keep some stability for the children in this hurtful time? It is at this point that good men can be lost from the ministry altogether. Because of the children's schools he looks for secular work in the locality so they can remain. Another man is knocked out at a time when God's kingdom can ill afford to lose faithful men. And if we enquire as to why the church decided to force him out the answer frequently does not bear New Testament scrutiny.

A pastor's wife will probably suffer most when her husband is suddenly sacked. The man she loves and has committed herself to is declared to be simply not good enough. She is sad beyond telling. She feels for him and she feels hurt herself. Her friendship networks within the church become strained. She may well feel extremely angry – especially if from her point of view all this has more or less come out of the blue. There are likely to be many sleepless nights for her as well as for him. 'What did we do wrong?' 'Why didn't they say anything?' 'Is it just because of our age?'

Bitterness is knocking on the front door and that is not good for anyone. One pastor's wife, Deanna Harrison has written a book about what happened to her and her husband: *Moving On: Surviving the grief of forced termination*. It is worth reading.

### **Effects on churches**

A pastor who was being forced to quit said to me, 'I think a lot of people in the church are confused at the moment, and for me to leave without a proper explanation won't help them.' Not knowing what has actually gone on, people can feel (wrongly) betrayed by the pastor and resolve never to get close to a pastor again. His 'abandoning' of them hurt them too much.

Although the instigators of getting rid of the pastor might think they are doing their church a favour very often they are not. Nearly two thirds of churches that force out ministers have done it before. That means a church gets a reputation among gospel preachers and prospective new pastors for being a hard place and not really the church you want to end up in. They may be all over you when you preach with a view but at the back of your mind you think that they will tire of me and get rid of me in a few years. That kind of reputation is very damaging to a church.

Further the forcing out of a pastor is likely to cause division in a church sooner or later. Some will be angry with the small group who pushed the man out, especially if the church as a whole was not consulted. Some will think the terms of severance were too generous; others that they were too stingy. These kinds of tensions tend to remain unresolved between people and to rear their heads in other situations down the line where the congregation has different opinions.

The 'hire and fire' attitude may look very business-like but its time for churches to think again and get back to a more Biblical view of church and how its affairs should be conducted.