

Forced Exit Dissertations Summary

Forced Exit = “any set of circumstances that results in a pastor leaving a church against his will” (Crowell, 1995, p. 16)

How Common?

- “Crowell compiled the results of 386 responses to a survey of 836 Protestant pastors. Of the 386 responses, 95 indicated that they had been forced out of their churches—a rate of 24.6% (cf. Crowell, 1992, p. 111).
- John LaRue, Jr., reported in 1996 on responses from a survey of pastors who were Leadership, Christianity Today, or Your Church magazines subscribers. In that survey 999 pastors (with 593 responding), the percentage of pastors reporting forced exits was 23% (LaRue, March-April, 1996, p. 72).

How Should a Pastor Respond to Being Fired/Forced to Resign?

- 2 Tim. 2:24-26 (response of humility and dependence on God); 3 Jn. 1:9-10 (does not fail to take appropriate pastor action)—retribution and retaliation are not the answer; cf. 1 Cor. 6:1-8 on litigation following a conflict between members of the congregation.

What Were the Reasons Given for One’s Termination?

- Unrealistic expectations which one feels inadequate to meet—some allowance needs to be made for God to work through an imperfect human being and for that pastor to be given time and guidance to grow (is plastic fruit that looks blemish-less really better?)

What Was the Cost to the Family of the Pastor Forced Out?

- Family tension plus effect on children who witness the clergy parent being aggressively (and very personally) criticized and forced to resign
- Displacement from home, job, community, with someone else quickly moving in to take one’s place
- Dreams and expectations shredded; cf. the story in Kopp, 35
- For the minister, the feeling of personal rejection and betrayal, a feeling like having a loved one die, and the irony of having been called to this work by God and yet having no place to serve. Will I ever get another position? Has God abandoned me? Can I trust the church? Restlessness
- Exited pastor and family are going to need a period of growth and development between church termination and what comes next

Looking Back: What Were the Factors Present Before Being Forced Out?

- Feeling always on due to preaching and other activities with little break from this routine
- Inadequate training in understanding and dealing with conflict (at least conflict that might threaten a pastor’s relationship with the church)

- Crisis/Termination was unexpected/without warning, often without due process—surprised by pressure to exit from a small but powerful minority of members
- In multi-staff churches different leadership style of associate in contrast with more closed, authoritarian style of senior pastor
 - However rigidity (in contrast to flexibility) can also lead to conflict and termination

Pre-Existing Experience of Pastor and/or Congregation with Forced Exits?

- 34% of pastors “serve congregations who either fired the previous minister or actively forced his or her resignation. Perhaps more telling, nearly one fourth (23%) of all current pastors have been forced out at some point in their ministry.” (LaRue, Mar. Apr. 1996, p. 72).
- Daill, p. 76 also reports 23.2% of sample had experience a forced exit at some point in their ministries.

Risk Profile for Those Terminated

- Those with a graduate degree related to ministry were more likely to be fired; those who completed a course of study (no undergraduate degree) or undergraduate degree were less likely to be fired (Daill, p. 70), although this is denied by Daill on next page, since education could have occurred after forced exit
- Average time serving church before being forced out was about 4 ½ years (4.3 for CMA and 4.4 for non-CMA churches previously served by presently CMA pastors) (Daill 76)
 - Larue average tenure before a transition (could be a positive or negative) was 4.9 years
 - Another study of Baptist pastors in Missouri gives 5 years: “The Missouri study by a research center affiliated with Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, found the average fired pastor in Missouri was a 40 year old male, married, with two children, who had served five years in the pulpit of a small-town, 250-member church” (“Ties that Break: Baptist Churches are Firing Pastors,” The Arizona Republic, Jan. 6, 1990)
 - Ties article continues: “And while a majority (63 percent) said their ex-churches had fired one or more prior ministers, only one had known of this before taking the job.”

Daill’s study (p. 88), however, does not show a significant link between pastoral tenure and forced exits or between the latter and age

In Daill’s study (p. 79), although 18% of churches had previously terminated a pastor, the number rose to 39% in churches in church where the subsequent pastor (surveyed) reported being forced out

When the superintendent intervened, this experience of intervention was negative rather than positive by a 4:1 ratio

Factors found by Daill. P. 86:

- (1) Powerful individuals “lording it over” church leaders
- (2) Unrealistic expectations for pastoral performance
- (3) Unresolved church trauma (including conflict or broken trust and the pain and guilt associated with or arising from these)
- (4) Competing power groups within congregation
- (5) Lack of people’s commitment to follow Christ in life (e.g. concerned about their own needs and fears, but lacking broader, deeper commitment to the church community or to the mission of the church)
- (6) Conflict over new program

Daill, 89: Exited pastors faulted themselves for

- (1) Being too passive or timid in leadership
- (2) Over-involvement outside local church (could be other work, programs to reach community, or the lost, etc.)
- (3) Being too domineering in leadership
- (4) A “hidden agenda” I brought in and tried to force on people
- (5) Significant change in beliefs
- (6) Unrealistic demands I made on members of my church
- (7) Sexual sin on my part

- Note that a timid style can represent an abdication of responsibility
 - Viewed as aloof;
 - Cannot make clear, direct statements and maintain behavior consistent with this;
 - Cannot set and maintain, even on his/her own part, a clear way forward;
 - Denies responsibility for what is happening, attributing the blame to others; consequently perceived as ineffective incompetent),
- A domineering style, however, can prevent others from assuming responsibility
 - Makes unilateral decisions without consulting the congregation;
 - Cannot accept or negotiate difference;
 - Interprets the world with respect to their own plans, attributing obstacles to others whom one sees as a threat;
 - Unwillingness/inability to delegate;
 - Does not support others emotionally while disagreeing with them intellectually.
- Both timid and domineering styles promote
 - A lack of communication and
 - A self-focused approach that left them unable to deal productively with conflict.

- Both approaches often see
 - Enemies as more malevolent than they actually are and
 - Oneself as more benevolent than one actually is. (cf. Leas, Involuntary Terminations, 20),

Both of these tendencies move one to withdrawal, separation and division and not toward healthy unity.

- Both styles end up leaving the laity more uninformed and passive than is healthy

Questions That Should Be Asked/Engaged to Lower the Risk of Forced Exits

- Need to clarify role expectations (excessive, unclear; job description missing, no longer relevant or non-existent),
- Need to connect through pastoral visitation
- Need to work through differences in priorities, conflicting visions, and issues of maintaining control (vs. fear of losing control) to arrive at common commitments and loyalties
- Role of building programs in generating conflict or contributing to pastoral departures needs to be looked at
- When a previous pastor has left, a pastor considering taking this job should ask himself/herself:
 - “Why did the previous pastor leave? What were the circumstances of his departure? How do the people of the church feel about the previous pastor? Are they positive or negative?” (Daill, p. 92)
 - “Is your style of leadership significantly different than those who have had successful ministry in that church?...Does your vision for ministry conflict with the vision of the [official or unofficial] leaders of the church?” (Daill, 119)
 - Does this job include an overload of responsibilities, which include many things I am not competent to do?
 - Does the pastor’s workload and the culture of the church tend to emphasize work done in isolation or is there a healthy vision for teams and for training/equipping?
 - Can this church’s problems really be solved by getting a new pastor?

Other Factors Likely to Increase the Risk of a Forced Exit

Leas, A Study of Involuntary Terminations, 15:

- Following a pastor with a tenure of more than 15 years (people with the strongest ties to the old pastor are most likely to seek the termination of the new pastor)
- Getting in the middle of an extended family conflict
- Angry, alienated, older ex-leaders who have a tie to the past congregational vision (or to a past pastor) and are unhappy with current changes and current leadership and can be unhappy with new people and new growth

and can be very adversarial toward the minister, the minister's family, and any new people who disagree with their position. They may encourage withholding of money from the church (at least to the central budget, though they may still give designated funds to something they value that is, in some sense, theirs or under their control).

- Supervisors need to offer more effective support for clergy in crisis. Quick way out by changing the pastor is not the best way forward and precludes the reconciliation that often needs to happen (who is accusing and meet with accusers)