

Forced exits erode clergy morale

by [David Briggs](#) in the [April 18, 2012](#) issue

They are called "clergy killers"—congregations in which a small group of members are so disruptive that no pastor is able to maintain spiritual leadership for long. Ministers often endure the stresses of these dysfunctional relationships for months, or even years, before eventually being forced out or giving up.

Adding to the strain is the fact that the reality is often shrouded in secrecy. No one—from denominational officials to church members to the clerics themselves—wants to acknowledge the failure of a relationship designed to be a sign to the world of mutual love and support.

But new research is providing insights into just how widespread—and damaging—these forced terminations can be to clergy. An online study published in the March issue of the *Review of Religious Research* found that 28 percent of ministers said they had at one time been forced to leave their jobs due to personal attacks and criticism from a small faction within their congregations.

The researchers—from Texas Tech University and Virginia Tech University—also found that the clergy who had been forced out were more likely to report lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression, stress and physical health problems.

Also, too few clergy are getting the help they need, said researcher Marcus Tanner of Texas Tech. "Everybody knows this is happening, but nobody wants to talk about it," Tanner said in an interview. "The vast majority of denominations across the country are doing absolutely nothing."

The issue of clergy job security will be front and center when delegates to the quadrennial General Conference of the United Methodist Church April 24 to May 4 consider a proposal to end "guaranteed appointments" for elders in good standing.

The church's Study of Ministry Commission says clergy job guarantees cost too much money and can focus more on the clergyperson's needs rather than the denomination's mission. On the other side, many clergy express fears that

eliminating job security may lead to arbitrary dismissals. A major concern is that clergy will be judged based on their performance at "toxic" congregations—churches with so much internal conflict that it is difficult for any minister to have success.

The clergy have good reason to worry. A small percentage of congregations do seem to be responsible for a large share of congregational conflict.

Seven percent of congregations accounted for more than 35 percent of all the conflict reported in a 2006–2007 National Congregations Study. And that conflict often had a high price. According to the study, nine percent of congregations reported a conflict in the last two years that led a clergyperson or other religious leader to leave the congregation.

It is difficult to get specific denominational figures, said Tanner. Many churches do not keep records indicating when a pastor was forced out as opposed to leaving voluntarily. And not only is it difficult to get clergy to open up about such painful experiences, but many ministers are forced to sign a nondisclosure agreement to receive their severance package.

In their study, Tanner, Anisa Zvonkovic and Charlie Adams recruited respondents through Facebook groups relating to Christian clergy. Four-fifths of the 582 ministers participating—410 males and 172 females from 39 denominations—ranged in age from 26 to 55.

The participants were asked whether they had ever left a job "due to the constant negativity found in personal attacks and criticism from a small faction of the congregation." Twenty-eight percent of the respondents said they had been forced from a ministry job. Three-quarters of those had been forced out once, and 4 percent had been forcibly terminated three or more times, the study found.

Even one time, however, is more than enough. Ministers who were forced out of their jobs because of congregational conflict were more likely to experience burnout, depression, lower self-esteem and more physical health problems, the online study found.

In addition, more than four in ten ministers forced out of their jobs reported seriously considering leaving the ministry.

A separate survey by Texas Tech and Virginia Tech researchers of 55 ministers who were forced out of a pastoral position found a significant link with self-reported measures of posttraumatic stress disorder and generalized anxiety disorder.

"This study shows that not only is forced termination an issue, but a cruel one that has very distressing effects on those who experience it," Tanner, Zvonkovic and Jeffrey Wherry reported in the current issue of the *Journal of Religion and Health*. "It is important that Christian organizations recognize the problem and implement steps to increase awareness and solutions."

Months of suffering traumatic and demeaning psychological and emotional abuse as they are slowly being forced out of their pulpits due to congregational conflict, Tanner said, "is a really, really horrible process." What makes it even worse is the complicity of silence that prevents clergy from getting the help they need to go forward. —thearda.com

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