

*Clergy Killers*, by Lloyd Rediger

reviewed by [Speed Leas](#) in the [July 29, 1998](#) issue

*By Lloyd Reidger, Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors and Congregations Under Attack. (Westminster John Knox, 200 pp.)*

When president Reagan called the Soviet Union an “evil empire,” I worried that his focus on quelling an enemy might cause him to lose sight of such goals as safety, order and peace. When Lloyd Rediger calls some church members “clergy killers,” my worries are much the same. I worry that he is operating more from anger than reason. Instead of helping people deal with problems in ways that evoke peace and unity, his tone and approach are more likely to provoke anxiety and reactive responses. In focusing on how clergy can protect themselves from the onslaughts of seriously disordered church members, he all but loses sight of parishioners, who should share the responsibility of coping with those who act inappropriately.

Rediger has much to say that is helpful and insightful. For example, he rightly points out that negotiation skills are inadequate for dealing with the kind of conflict he calls abnormal or spiritual. Negotiation is a useful tool for rational people dealing with the sharing of resources or making decisions about organization goals or methods of achieving those goals. Negotiation is not a helpful way of changing interaction patterns or helping people maintain appropriate boundaries.

Rediger accurately points out that some individuals and groups do not operate out of concern for the greater good, or even their own good. Negotiating with such people would only mean giving away part of the store.

Hidden away in a paragraph in the center of his book is what I believe to be Rediger’s most important point, which I wish he had given greater prominence. He states that the responsibility for dealing with “people [who] are not fully responsible for the abuse or their disorders” belongs to “all who care in the church.” He goes on: “We must love [those who are abusive] in ways appropriate to their conditions. This means they must be identified early and channeled into treatment, if at all possible. They must not be allowed to harm others or acquire leadership positions until treatment has been effective. And if they begin their patterns of devastation, they

must be stopped for everyone's benefit."

Seriously disordered parishioners do real damage to both clergy and others in the church. Unfortunately, Rediger restricts his focus to clergy self-care and pays scant attention to the damage inflicted on other individuals, the Christian community or the congregation's mission. By far the most difficult task in dealing with disruptive parishioners is getting others in the congregation to acknowledge the problem and stop enabling it. Rediger's sections on building support systems for and maintaining the physical fitness of pastors are helpful. The sections about building up the body of Christ to better deal with disruption (he talks briefly about developing a grievance process, having healthy worship, healing, and the use of models and mentors--all worthy topics) are short, vague and inadequate.

How does one build a community in which people are responsible for one another? The "tough love" Rediger admires needs to be acquired by many in the congregation--not just the pastor. And the ability to confront people in a loving way probably needs to be acquired long before a full-blown case of clergy-killing erupts. Indeed, mustering the requisite stamina and wisdom in the heat of the fray is next to impossible.

*Clergy Killers* may actually harm those Rediger wants most to protect. As long as congregations see the problems generated by disordered persons as the pastor's concern, the clergy will continue to be victimized. The congregation will want the pastor to placate those who are acting out, and the pastor will agree that this is his or her responsibility. Congregations often blame the victims of abuse and are all too willing to blame clergy. The community of faith must realize that it is diminished by not responding appropriately to aberrant behavior.

If we focus on the damage done to the pastor and not on the perpetrator, we might believe that a stronger pastor would solve the problem. Like Rediger, I doubt it. Not until we recognize that dealing with destructive behavior is the responsibility of the whole community, and we show that community a way to respond, is the behavior likely to change.