

Fired? Forced out? You're not alone.

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When we think about church, we imagine that place where people bring their best selves to worship God. We glean wisdom from ancient texts, sing with soaring voices, and strive to be better humans.

But there is something else upon which we don't often opine. It's the shadow side to all that light.

Pastors get fired. Pastors are forced to leave their positions.

When I first graduated from seminary, I'd hear about a pastor being asked to leave and I'd think, *Oh my. What did that monster do? I mean, to be forced out of a church? It had to have been a terrible scandal!*

Then, I had my own moments in the church. In one congregation, an unidentified elder wrote that I was an egomaniac (among many other things) in a personnel review. A few people in the congregation didn't like me. They began to talk about me, and I'd receive a concerned phone call each Monday morning detailing my flaws, according to unnamed sources. As far as I could tell, it was just three people, but they were powerful and loud.

Wanting to establish clear lines of communication, I asked for names so that we could reconcile any grievance in person. No one would communicate directly. So I sighed, ignored, and tried harder. I worked longer. I visited more often. The church was growing in vitality, membership, and income. The numbers looked great, but it seemed like the more I tried to get certain people to like me, the more they *really didn't* like me.

I felt like I was back in high school, with an enormous crush on a guy, trying to get a date to the prom. You know that feeling, when you know you're trying too hard, but you don't know what to do other than try harder? I didn't have that particular emotional attraction to these people (I simply had dutiful pastoral love), but I had

that growing desperation. My smile spread too widely and my voice roller-coastered as the sense of failure, loss of affirmation, and stress of finances threatened me.

I know it's not a pastor's job to make everyone like her. Being disliked is part of the job. I know that [women get more negative and personal criticisms than males](#). I've been in plenty of churches where certain people didn't like me. I can roll with it. This was different. The feelings somehow poisoned the air.

So, one Monday morning, the concerned phone call came. It was a holiday, but the phone still rang at home. I had started woodworking as a way to hammer out my anger and sand out my stress. I stood with my hammer and my exhaustion impelled me to finally ask the right question, "Could you just please just tell me what's at the root of all this? Why don't they like me?"

There was a pause. Then the parishioner said, "They don't like you because you are young and you are a woman."

I burst out in laughter as a strange relief flooded me. "You know, I didn't hide that fact when you hired me! And I really can't do much about it."

I hung up the phone and felt released from my covenant with the congregation. Not the day-to-day work, of course, but the long-term struggle. I realized that I could never be the pastor they wanted, and trying harder wasn't going to do it. They didn't have a problem with my work. They just didn't like *me*. For some reason, that went from being a burden to a liberation. I dusted off my feet and my resume that afternoon.

It took a year to find another position. The length of time is typical, but I became scared. *What if I'm just a terrible pastor? What if I'm not cut out for this work? If I was smarter, I would've been able to handle the situation better.* But I wasn't a bad pastor. And they weren't bad people. It was a matter of strange chemistry. When I moved on, things were fine. I loved my call again. They're doing great and I'm doing great.

The point is, sometimes people don't like us, and there's nothing we can do about it. In the church, it's particularly true. The pitch of our voice. Our leadership style. The way we dress. Our humor. Our lack of humor. We get on people's nerves for very strange reasons.

A church will blame the pastor for membership decline, without realizing that there has been a significant population plummet in the entire town.

Or members shun any idea that might attract younger generations, and then become *shocked* when older members die.

Or a congregation doesn't realize that decline is a national trend, and they think that firing the pastor will save the church.

Or the church has relied on investment income for so long, that when the market goes south, they worry. They equated their vitality with their bank account, so they think that they should let go of their pastor in order to survive (which often ensures their demise).

I'm not saying that it's *never* the pastor's fault when a relationship goes sour. I am saying that we hear about the big scandals and (understandably) hide our own petty struggles. When pastors leave, it's usually because of a small group of people. We still love the others. We want the best for the church. So we slip out quietly, for their good and for our professional reputation. As a result, we don't realize how often pastors get fired because of chemistry, power, class, skin color, ability, gender, age, history, or something else that the pastor has no control over.

If you've been fired or forced out, it doesn't always mean you need to fold up the cloth all together. It's incredibly painful. We might feel a spiritual rejection that we've never experienced. We may have a loss of identity. Betrayal might become wounds that are so deep that we don't feel like we'll be able to love a congregation again. We may feel abandoned by God. But sometimes we just need to need to endure the ache, walk through the rejection, and find a place where our gifts can flourish.

And, please, realize that most pastors have gone through this in one form or another. It may feel like you've lost all human connection, but you are not alone.