

God Help Me! These People Are Driving Me Nuts, by Gregory K. Popcak and Never Call Them Jerks, by Arthur Paul Boers

reviewed by [David Mosser](#) in the [November 14, 2001](#) issue

Why don't people get angry with an oncologist or a surgeon who delivers a cancer diagnosis? Why don't law clients fly into fits of rage when an attorney fails to win their case? Why do people not jump to string up their stockbrokers when the financial markets perform feebly? People may feel such rage, but they rarely express it to these professionals. In church life, however, pastors habitually face parishioners' peculiar and angry behavior. Often these pastors don't understand what could possibly have generated such reactions. Some seasoned veterans suggest that "it goes with the turf." Others believe that anger within parishes is more intense now than ever before. What is troubling the Body of Christ? Why are so many otherwise loving and caring people expressing such anger at the church?

Experts present a throng of sociological answers. Some say that our recent social evolution has created overly high expectations for service-oriented businesses. Consumers, even in not-for-profit sectors, expect five-star treatment and have zero tolerance for either real or imaginary second-rate service. But the issue of expectations runs still deeper. Studies of children's psychoses reveal parental expectations too high for children to abide. Pastors, too, fall victim to society's unrealistic expectations.

Add to this the reality that in most churches everyone has "a say in how things are run." Whether or not parishioners possess expertise in particular tasks, many feel compelled to voice their opinions on everything from how the church nursery operates to what hymns congregations sing to the disbursement of mission money. Parishioners even feel qualified to critically evaluate preaching. Finally, ordinarily churches do not give preachers permission to ignore abnormal behavior. Nor do

churches conventionally permit pastors to fight back against criticism.

In response to this quandary of pastoral need two new books have appeared. Each supplies a basic analysis and strategy to help leaders address problems that Paul also might have called "thorns in the flesh."

Greg Popcak, a licensed psychotherapist, provides help for people at risk in injurious relationships. The book's subtitle summarizes its content: *Making Peace with Difficult People*. Popcak suggests behavioral strategies for coping with the people with whom our relationships have twisted from blessing to liability. A lay Roman Catholic, he writes from a "Christian" perspective. Generally, this Christian designation raises caution flags for me. I am never certain what someone who professes to give us advice on everything from how to get along with each other to how to teach the family dog "that Christian obedience that Fido needs" has to do with the historic confessions of faith. However, although alluding to his faith throughout, Popcak does not refer to it in a heavy-handed way.

This is a practical book. Readers searching for incisive insights into the human pathology of "preacher persecution" must look elsewhere. What Popcak provides is a step-by-step method for contending with people who render us nonfunctional. He gives case studies that illustrate his self-described "P-E-A-C-E" process. Although this book's target audience is not church leaders, pastors will find it useful in challenging people who make life miserable for them. As a bonus, Popcak writes with a humor readers may appreciate.

In contrast, Arthur Boers's book is a wonderful gift "for preacher's only." Boers is familiar with church pathology and with how that pathology affects church leaders. He gets beneath the symptoms of difficult behavior and explores root causes of aberrant conduct. "I undertook this work because dealing with difficult behavior in the congregation is one of the biggest and most draining challenges in pastoring. But 'draining' does not have to mean debilitating. In fact, facing such difficulties has contributed more to my growth as a person and pastor than any other hurdles I have encountered," Boers writes.

For me, difficult people in the church have something in common with the poor; "we will always have them with us" (Mark 14:7). Rather than bewail difficulties, Christian leaders need tactics that help them to understand and respond in healthy and faithful ways. Boers provides us with material that will not only help us survive difficult people, but minister to them.