

Clergy Who Experience Trauma as a Result of Forced Termination

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Abstract Forced termination of clergy is a demeaning and psychologically distressing experience. Clergy who experience a forced termination are subjected to mobbing (psychological harassment) and other activities meant to publicly or privately demean a minister in such a way that they resign their ministry position. In a purposive convenience sample of 55 ministers who had been forcibly terminated, participants scored above the known cut-off score for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and scored high on a measure of burnout and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). Forced termination has been anecdotally connected to PTSD and GAD, this project sought to empirically link PTSD and GAD to the forced termination of clergy. This study raises concern for the long-term mental health effects of ministers who have been forcibly terminated and provides implications for future clinical study on this group of clergy. Findings in this research indicate there may be a process to forced termination, which could be developed into a theory on forced termination of clergy.

Keywords Forced termination · Clergy health · Mental health · Mobbing · Burnout

Introduction

Although forced termination has been a subject of interest to clergy for some time, social scientists largely have ignored this prevalent problem among Christian denominations. Social science researchers have examined the difficulties and stressful nature of ministry work dating back to Blizzard's (1958) study, but have failed to examine the phenomenon

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of forced termination, a psychologically distressing experience. The extant literature on forced termination of clergy is minimal at best (Barfoot et al. 2005; Crowell 1995; Tanner and Zvonkovic 2011; Tanner et al., in press).

This study posits an empirical connection between the forced termination of clergy and what the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) (APA 1994) describes as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and general anxiety disorder (GAD). This review of the literature first describes relevant studies on ministry demands, burnout, and forced termination; the concept of mobbing; and the association between mobbing, PTSD and GAD symptoms.

Literature Review

Kanter (1977) described the church as a “controlling organization” that requires work from members of the family other than the minister, who is the person paid for ministry work. The work of the ministry is a demanding profession constantly spilling over into the family domain. Ministry demands make it difficult to balance work and family. The chronic stress of working with demanding people takes its toll on ministers and may result in ministry burnout. Additionally, ministers who do not meet the demands of a church may face forced termination which has long-term implications for family well-being and physical health (Tanner and Zvonkovic 2011; Tanner et al., in press).

Ministry Demands

Intrusive demands of ministry work have a detrimental effect on the attitude and well-being of ministers (Han and Lee 2004; Lee 1999; Lee and Balswick 2006; Lee and Iverson-Gilbert 2003; Morris and Blanton 1994). Lee (1999) surveyed 312 ministers from five Protestant denominations and identified four classifications of intrusive demands: personal criticism, presumptive expectations, boundary ambiguity, and family criticism. Respondents reported experiencing more presumptive expectations from church members, and the boundaries separating work and family were ambiguous. In addition, boundary ambiguity type demands occurred more often than presumptive expectations. Lee’s (1999) ministry demands were significantly associated with measures of burnout. He concluded that the consequences of ministry work are different than other careers in the way work-related stress for ministers is not confined to the domain of the workplace, but is more globally impacting and affects other relational areas (i.e., other church members, family members, other church staff, and other clergy members).

Burnout is a common problem for those working in caring professions. It is defined as emotional exhaustion as a result of chronic stress from working with people (Maslach et al. 2001). Burnout is characterized by three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (an uncaring or dehumanized attitude), and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Randall 2004). As Lee (1999) demonstrated that ministers who experience a high level of ministry demands are likely to experience burnout. A range of physical and psychological problems associated with burnout and the ministry profession (Kaldor and Bullpitt 2001). According to the researchers, ministry is a high-risk occupation (Hoge and Wenger 2005). Not only do clergy struggle with the effects of high ministry demands, they also face a phenomenon that has long-term physical and mental health implications; forced termination (Tanner and Zvonkovic 2011; Tanner et al., in press).

Forced Termination

Forced termination should be considered a new area of study. The scholarly literature on forced termination comes from three empirical studies; Crowell's (1995) dissertation which focused primarily on the lack of church discipline as a precursor for a forced termination of clergy, but provided no definition of forced termination. Church discipline is the method churches use to regulate or control problem members or potential conflict. One extreme form of church discipline is the ex-communication of church members. Barfoot et al.'s (2005) exploratory study on forced termination provided a working definition

Forced pastoral exit is a process by which a congregation, a personnel committee, or individual leader within a church terminates or forces the resignation of a minister from a position of ministry (LaRue, 1996). Furthermore a pastor may abdicate his post due to the constant negativity found in personal attacks and criticism from a small faction within the congregation from whom the minister feels psychologically pressured to step down from his or her service of ministry (Goodwin, 1997).

The lack of definition in Crowell's (1995) dissertation is an unaddressed major limitation, and Barfoot et al.'s (2005) working definition was a confluence of two other non-scholarly works. Tanner and Zvonkovic (2011) defined forced termination as "the result of a process of involuntary removal of paid and non-paid clergy-persons that includes psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual abuse." This project provides some rationale for a definition of forced termination that includes essential components of the process, as findings may show forced termination to be much more detrimental to clergy's mental health than past empirical research shows. In addition, it should be noted that forced termination of clergy should be distinguished from leaving the ministry and is different than job loss in a non-clergy work environment (Tanner and Zvonkovic 2011).

Causes of Forced Termination

Barfoot et al. (2005) identified personality conflicts and conflicting vision for the church as factors that typically lead to forced termination. Differences between the pastor and the congregation in music and worship style were reported in Barfoot's work. Conflict over leadership styles and vision for the church (Willis 2001) were identified as other potential causes of forced termination. Crowell's (1995) study involved a sampling of church leaders and found that 21% said the pastor was unfit or was not "called," and 20% said congregational politics or powerful individuals were responsible for the pastor's forced termination.

Effects of Forced Termination

Tanner and Zvonkovic (2011) showed forced termination to be detrimental to clergy's sense of family well-being and physical health. Barfoot et al. (2005) revealed clergy (71%) and their family (67%) had a diminished ability to trust people. Sixty-nine percent faced long-term financial instability and had lower self-confidence (59%). LaRue (1996) gives few indications of the effects forced termination has on clergy except to say that two-thirds of children impacted by their parent's forced termination were forced to change schools, and spouses of clergy were forced to change jobs. Further, 10% experienced a major illness within 12 months of being forced out.

Studying Forced Termination

Extant literature shows that forced termination among clergy is a problem; between 23% and 41% of pastors experience a forced termination at least once during their ministry (Crowell 1995; Tanner and Zvonkovic 2011; Tanner et al., in press). Larue (1997) reported 91% of clergy know a minister who has been forced out, 23% of clergy having a personal experience with forced termination, and 34% reported their predecessor as being forced out. Tanner and Zvonkovic (2011) reported 41% of Assemblies of God clergy experience forced termination. The demeaning and systematic process has a long-term effect on the clergy who experience it. Greenfield (2001) described the systematic way in which a few individuals in the church were responsible for harassing ministers in such a way that they were forced to leave. Leymann's (1996) work on mobbing is closely related to work on forced termination among clergy.

Mobbing

Leymann (1996) and Leymann and Gustafsson (1996) described a process of *mobbing* in the work place where a "victim is subjected to a systematic, stigmatizing process, and encroachment of his or her civil rights" (p. 165). Their work primarily focused on a number of work environments in Sweden, Finland, and Norway. The research on mobbing does not include the ministry as a work environment. However, Leymann's entire body of work on mobbing is very similar to the concept and existing information on the forced termination of clergy (see Greenfield 2001).

Operationalized, mobbing "involves hostile and unethical communication, which is directed in a systematic way by one or a few individuals mainly toward one individual who, due to mobbing, is pushed into a helpless and defenseless position, being held there by means of continuing mobbing activities" (Leymann 1996, p. 168). These activities happen on an almost daily basis and occur for months. Leymann (1996) posits that individuals who are victims of mobbing may experience psychological and physical stress. The result of mobbing is a type of forced termination from the job and may lead to total expulsion from the labor market, in this case leaving the ministry altogether.

Leymann (1996) revealed some of the following mobbing activities that people may experience: (a) the victim is silenced by those in charge and left with the inability to speak out for fear, (b) verbal threats, and other verbal activities which become part of keeping a person from doing their job effectively, (c) being isolated from other people in the organization, (d) ridicule, (e) gossiping or rumors, (f) being given meaningless tasks, and (g) being harassed in a threatening way. These types of activities are very similar to clergy forced termination activities (Greenfield 2001). Leymann discusses some of the effects that mobbing may have on an individual, including development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and expulsion from the labor market. Leymann's (1996) work reveals that 10–20% of mobbing victims develop a serious illness or commit suicide as a result of being mobbed.

Zapf et al. (1996) in their study of 149 mobbing victims showed that "mobbing leads to severe health consequences" (p. 233). Their sample is not described in terms of the professional work environment. The participants were recruited through local media and self-help groups designed for mobbing victims. More than half of their sample received medical treatment as a result of mobbing activities, and more than half had three or more periods of sick leave during the previous 12 months.

This study posits that the process of forced termination involves what Leymann (1996) describes as mobbing inasmuch as it occurs over a period of time and results in the expulsion of the minister from the church. Further, because mobbing and forced termination are conceptually linked, the rationale exists that serious mental health problems may occur as a result of forced termination.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and General Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

PTSD is described by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition* (APA 1994) as:

the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate. (p. 424)

GAD is described by the DSM-IV (APA 1994) as “excessive anxiety and worry, occurring more days than not for a period of at least 6 months” (p. 472). A person will find it difficult to control the worry, the anxiety will be accompanied by at least three additional symptoms, and the individual will report subjective distress because of the constant worry.

The research on mobbing illustrates a connection between the occurrence of mobbing and PTSD and GAD. Anecdotally, both PTSD and GAD are commonly attributed as effects of forced termination among clergy. However, no empirical research has connected these disorders to forced termination of clergy. This study argues that, perhaps, clergy do indeed experience symptoms of acute PTSD (because symptoms may usually last fewer than 3 months) or at the very least experience GAD. It should be noted that forced termination does not fit the definition of a traumatic event (criterion A of PTSD) according to the DSM-IV (APA 1994). Work on mobbing (Groeblichhoff and Becker 1996; Leymann 1996; Leymann and Gustafsson 1996; Niedl 1996; Resch and Schubinski 1996; Zapf et al. 1996), bullying in the workplace (Einarsen and Hoel 2001; Einarsen and Skogstad 1996; Jiménez et al. 2007; Mikkelsen and Einarsen 2002; Vartia 1996), and work on forced termination among clergy (Barfoot et al. 2005; Crowell 1995; Tanner and Zvonkovic 2011; Tanner et al., in press) would indicate symptoms of PTSD, or GAD would be a deleterious outcome to be expected for those experiencing the phenomenon of forced termination.

Purpose of the Study

The review of literature on the forced termination of clergy clearly shows it to be a problem that has received little attention. A pilot project by Tanner and Zvonkovic (2011) on forced termination of clergy showed 41% of Assemblies of God ministers experienced forced termination. Although Barfoot et al. (2005) discussed several tangible effects of forced termination and Tanner and Zvonkovic (2011) discussed physical health outcomes, very little is known about the mental health effects of forced termination of clergy. The purpose of this study is to examine the mental health effects of forced termination among clergy. With that in mind, the following hypotheses are presented:

Hypothesis one predicts that clergy's perception of termination is predicted by the issues surrounding the termination.

Hypothesis two predicts mobbing and psychological harassment will be positively related to post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and burnout among clergy who have been terminated.

Hypothesis three predicts mental health problems (PTSD, Anxiety, and Burnout) would be significantly increased by termination issues, levels of psychological harassment and mobbing, and perceptions of termination.

Methods

Procedure

This project made use of a small purposive convenience sample and used subjects from two previous studies by the authors who were willing to participate in future studies on forced termination. An email was sent to 100 individuals inviting them to participate in a study on forced termination. A link was provided in an email to an online study. Qualtrics was used as the survey software, specifically because it allows for skip logic and piping. These are two techniques that allow participants to skip questions that are not pertinent to them based on answers provided on previous questions. Seventy-eight people responded to the survey, but only 55 completed the survey, providing for a 55% return rate. Twenty-seven percent of the samples were Assemblies of God ministers, 18% were Baptist, 15% were non-Denominational, 9% were Methodist, 9% were Presbyterian, 6% were Church of Christ, while all other denominations made up 15% of the sample. The denominational demographics are representative of clergy who have been forcibly terminated (Tanner et al., in press). Demographic information for participants can be found in Table 1.

Measures

The literature suggests that forced termination is a psychologically demeaning process. The measures used in this survey were designed to measure trauma, psychological abuse, burnout, and anxiety.

Perceptions of Terminated Ministers (PTM)

First, scores were computed for each participant that completed the *Perceptions of Terminated Ministers* (PTM) scale. The PTM scale was designed by the authors for use in determining the perceptions clergy have of forced termination and uses an 11-item Likert Scale. Participants were presented with a series of statements and asked to select an answer that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample statement is, "I often think about the day I was forced to resign or was terminated from a ministry position." A total possible score was calculated by multiplying the number of questions by five. A mid-range score is 27.5. Scores above 27.5 would indicate an increasingly negative perception of forced termination on the original scale. Reliability yielded a Cronbach's alpha score of .84.

Table 1 Demographic variables

Variables	%	n
Minister gender		55
Male	67.3	
Female	32.7	
Minister age		
15–24 years	1.8	
25–34 years	10.9	
35–44 years	29.1	
45–54 years	47.3	
55–64 years	7.3	
65–74 years	1.8	
75–84 years	1.8	
Minister's marital status		
Married	81.8	
All other categories	18.2	
Ministry position at forced termination		
Children's pastor	1.8	
Youth pastor	7.3	
Associate pastor	16.4	
Senior/solo pastor	36.4	
Worship/music pastor	1.8	
Other	9.1	

Perceptions of Terminated Ministers Revised (PTM-R)

Second, because forced termination could be considered a distressing event, five questions related to symptoms of PTSD were added to the PTM scale. Those questions were developed from the description of PTSD in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition* (1994). A sample item reads, “Reminders of the event are stressful.” The rationale for the included items derives from non-empirical writings on the subject of forced termination and peer-reviewed research (Faulkner 1986; Onley 1994; Tanner and Zvonkovic 2011). A total possible score was calculated by multiplying the number of questions by five. A mid-range score is 40. A score above 40 would indicate an increasingly negative perception of forced termination and symptoms of PTSD. Frequencies in SPSS were used to determine the percentage of participants that scored above the mid-range; forty-eight percent of the sample scored above 40 on the revised measure. The frequency scores indicate that these ministers have a negative perception of their termination and self-select-related symptoms of PTSD. The PTM-R scale with the additional items yielded a Cronbach's alpha score of .90.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Post-traumatic stress disorder was measured using the Impact of Event Scale: Revised (IES-R) (Weiss 1996). The IES-R consists of 22 self-report items, measured on a 5-point scale 1(not at all) to 5 (extremely), that assess the degree of PTSD symptoms experienced in relation to a particular event. The IES-R assesses trauma-related intrusion, avoidance symptoms, and hyperarousal symptoms of PTSD. Weiss, Marmar, Metzler, and Ronfeldt

(1995) reported high internal reliability for the subscales of intrusion ($\alpha = .85$), avoidance ($\alpha = .85$) and hyperarousal ($\alpha = .77$). Reliability for the full scale score in this study was .96. The mean score for PTSD as measured by the IES-R was 49 ($SD = 21.35$), and cut-off scores for the IES-R have been reported at 33 (Creamer et al. 2003).

Mobbing

Mobbing was assessed using the *Negative Acts Questionnaire* (NAQ) (Gemzoe-Mikkelsen and Einarsen 2002). The NAQ includes 14 items, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (never to daily). A sample item reads, “Someone withheld necessary information affecting your performance.” Participants were asked to respond to mobbing activities that occurred during the 6 months leading up to their forced termination. A score above 35 would indicate mid to high levels of mobbing activities; 56% of the sample scored above the mid-range. Reliability for this study was .95.

In addition, participants were asked to respond to a single question on the frequency of psychological harassment. In the survey, psychological harassment was defined as “consisting of continued hostile attitudes, directed in a systematic way by one or more individuals against another one, with the purpose of discrediting, to humiliate, to isolate, and to cause the abandonment of the job.” Frequency of psychological harassment was measured on a 6-point Likert type scale 0 (none) to 6 (yes, daily). Twenty-four percent of respondents experienced psychological harassment several times a month.

Ministry Burnout

Ministry Burnout was assessed using a revision of the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry (SEEM) developed by Francis et al. (2004) and the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale (SIMS) developed by Francis et al. (2005). The SEEM and the SIMS are each an 11-item Likert scale for a total of 22 items, each measured 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item from the SEEM is, “fatigue and irritation are part of my daily experiences.” A sample item from the SIMS is, “I have accomplished many worthwhile things in my ministry here.” Reliability for this study was .94.

Termination Issues

Participants also were asked to self-select from 24 items described as issues relating to forced termination. Crowell (1995) used these items as part of a dissertation. A sample item reads, “The following were factors in my forced termination: lingering loyalty to previous pastor.” Crowell did not report Cronbach’s alpha of these items as a scale, however, for this study reliability was measured at .79. Additionally, a Pearson correlation analysis was used to determine items that provided a cohesive association with one another. Those items were used to determine a construct labeled “termination issues” and included unresolved church trauma, unrealistic expectations for pastoral performance, and lingering loyalty to previous pastor.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Finally, participants were assessed on symptoms of anxiety using the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) (Beck, Epstein, Brown, and Steer 1988). There are 21 symptoms of

generalized anxiety disorder. Participants are asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale (not at all to severe). Sample symptoms include “feeling hot” and “unable to relax.” Participants reported severe symptoms as “numbness or tingling” (17%), “unable to relax” (36%), “fear of worst happening” (41%), “heart pounding or racing” (17%), “nervous” (24%), and “fear of losing control” (15%). The mean score for generalized anxiety disorder as measured by the BAI was 24 ($SD = 18.7$), and cut-off scores for the BAI have been reported at greater than 26 (Cochrane-Brink, Lofchy, and Sakinofsky 2000). Reliability for this study was .94.

Results

Hypothesis one predicted that clergy’s perception of termination would be predicted by the issues surrounding their termination. A linear regression was used to analyze this hypothesis. Perceptions of termination (PTM-R) were significantly predicted by termination issues; $R^2 = .23$ $p < .01$. The construct of termination issues accounted for 23% of the variance as it related to minister’s perception of their forced termination. The direction of the relationship was positive $B = 6.81$ such that as termination issues increased, so did the negative perception of the termination.

Hypothesis two predicted the mobbing and psychological harassment would be significantly and positively associated with mental health issues, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and burnout. A Pearson correlation was used to analyze this hypothesis. Mobbing was significantly and positively related to generalized anxiety disorder $r = .35$, $p < .05$, and psychological harassment was positively and significantly related to post-traumatic stress disorder $r = .51$, $p < .01$ (see Table 2). Criterion A in the DSM-IV (APA 1994) shows that an individual that exhibits excessive anxiety or worry for more than 6 months about a number of events or activities may be diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). These results indicate that GAD is significantly and positively correlated with the number of mobbing events clergy experienced, which were associated with their forced termination. In addition, the frequency of mobbing (psychological harassment) was associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a more severe diagnosis than GAD in part because Criterion A requires a person to have experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with a traumatic event and the person’s response to that trauma involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Clergy scored above known clinical cut-off scores for PTSD as it relates to forced termination. However, forced termination cannot be defined as a traumatic event according to the DSM-IV (APA 1994). Mobbing and psychological harassment were significantly correlated $p < .05$; that clergy

Table 2 Correlations table

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Anxiety (BAS)	–				
Burnout (MBS)	.30	–			
PTSD	.31	.38*	–		
Psychological harassment	–	.01	.51**	–	
	.04				
Mobbing	.35*	.01	.18	.41*	–

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Table 3 Multiple regression analysis on each of the dependent variables

Dependent	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	R^2
PTSD				.46***
PTM-R	−.83	.25	−.49**	
Mobbing	−.13	.19	−.10	
Psychological harassment	5.8	2.3	.38	
GAD				.34**
PTM-R	−.66	.24	−.46**	
Mobbing	.41	.19	.37*	
Psychological harassment	−4.21	2.2	−.33	
Ministry burnout				.18*
PTM-R	−.63	.26	−.46*	
Mobbing	−.03	.20	−.03	
Psychological harassment	−1.31	2.4	−.11	

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

experience both a number of events and with high frequency may contribute to the explanation of high scores on PTSD.

The empirical link between forced termination and mental health issues like PTSD and GAD was a key factor in this study. Although the correlations were modest at best, this study shows a statistically significant link between the variables. The results have shown respondents score high on self-report measures of PTSD and GAD. Clergy also scored high on measures of mobbing and psychological harassment.

Hypothesis three predicted mental health problems (PTSD, Anxiety, and Burnout) would be predicted by perceptions of termination, mobbing, and psychological harassment. A series of multiple regression analyses were conducted on each of the dependent variables. Scores on post-traumatic stress disorder were significantly predicted by all three independent variables (PTM-R, mobbing, and psychological harassment) in the model $p < .001$, $R^2 = .46$. Scores on generalized anxiety disorder were significantly predicted by all three independent variables (PTM-R, mobbing, and psychological harassment) in the model $p < .01$, $R^2 = .34$ (see Table 3). The multiple regression analysis on Ministry Burnout was not significant. However, because the other mental health issues were predicted at such a high level, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed using Ministry Burnout as the dependent variable, and each of the independent variables were entered hierarchically into the model. Perceptions of termination (PTM-R) were entered as the first independent variable to predict ministry burnout, and it was the only significant predictor of burnout, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .15$. Entering the other independent variables into the model significantly deterred the model and were subsequently rejected as predictors of burnout.

Limitations

One limitation of the study has been noted—data were not collected in a clinical setting for the variables of PTSD and GAD. This study allowed for a partial assessment of symptoms related to PTSD, and GAD that related literature shows would be relevant to forced termination among clergy. Although the assessments were not clinically assessed, the study showed that clergy experience symptoms of PTSD and GAD as it relates to their forced

termination experience. In addition, the length of time between the event and the survey was lengthy; some of the participants were remembering an event that happened, in some cases 5 years before the time of the survey.

Sample size was another limitation to this study. The study made use of a small purposive convenience sample of clergy who had been forcibly terminated from a ministry position. The small sample size does not allow for generalization among larger populations of clergy. However, the results of this small sample size are consistent with other studies of clergy who have experienced forced termination (Barfoot et al. 2005; Crowell 1995; Tanner and Zvonkovic 2011). Further, this study, although modest, provided an empirical association with PTSD and GAD.

Discussion

This study's purpose was to examine the mental health effects of forced termination on clergy. Although the number of respondents was small, the sample focused on clergy who have experienced a forced termination. The measures used in this study were focused on mental health. Overall, this study shows a connection between the mental health of clergy and forced termination. Mobbing and psychological harassment of clergy have serious implications concerning symptoms of PTSD and GAD. This study made a significant addition to the literature on forced termination of clergy, primarily in its empirical link between forced termination and self-report scores on measures of PTSD and GAD.

The issues surrounding forced termination were a significant predictor of the perceptions ministers had of the event. Issues of termination concentrated on unresolved conflict and lingering loyalty to the previous pastor. These issues, among others, accounted for 23% of the variance on perceptions of terminated ministers (PTM-R). Obviously, other unaccounted for variables have an impact on the perceptions of termination, but conflict and loyalty to the previous pastor explained near one-quarter of the variation.

Clergy who participated in this study had seriously high levels of anxiety as it related to their forced termination—in many of the cases, more than a year had passed between forced termination and participating in the study. This finding may suggest that forced termination has long-term negative mental health effects. Thirty-six percent of the sample scored above the mean score and known cut-off score for symptoms of GAD. In addition, 46% of the sample scored above the mean score and well above the clinical cut-off score for symptoms of PTSD. It is important to note that this study was not carried out in a clinical setting; rather, all of the items related to PTSD and GAD were reported by the participants. It is also important to note that measured by the instruments in this survey alone, the participants do not meet the DSM-IV diagnostic criterion for PTSD, but may for GAD. At the same time, these are important findings. The type and frequency with which participants experienced mobbing and psychological harassment were significantly associated with measures on PTSD and GAD.

The perception ministers had of their forced termination was the most significant predictor of mental health issues. Each regression analysis performed included mobbing and psychological harassment as independent variables, but the larger percent of variance was explained by scores on the PTM-R for each mental health variable (i.e., PTSD, GAD, and Burnout). Not only did clergy have a very negative perception of their forced termination, but perception predicted negative mental health. The empirical connection to PTSD and GAD provides a rationale for a more inclusive definition of forced termination: Forced termination is the result of a process of involuntary removal of paid and non-paid

clergy-persons that results from a period of traumatic and demeaning psychological and emotional abuse. Although this definition is more parsimonious than the working definition of Barfoot et al. (2005), it still lacks a theoretical foundation. It already has been noted that forced termination is different than job loss in general, and perhaps, because of the issues surrounding forced termination, the psychological harassment clergy experience, and their perceptions of those events, make forced termination a traumatic or at least very distressing event, with long lasting effects, for the minister and possibly the church where the termination took place.

Implications

Previous studies show that 25–41% of Christian ministers experience forced termination at least once during their career (Barfoot et al. 2005; Crowell 1995; Tanner and Zvonkovic 2011). Forced termination of clergy is a problem that may be more serious than some are willing to admit. Carroll (2000) stated that numbers of new people entering the ministry are relatively flat and indicated that those numbers may fall in coming years. As previously stated, little is known about forced termination among clergy; few peer-reviewed empirical research projects exist on the subject, and many Christian churches and organizations find the subject taboo. Perhaps, the prevalence rates of forced termination are much higher, but Christian organizations are unwilling to admit there is a problem and work with researchers to understand it. Perhaps, the number of new ministers entering seminary is declining because they are unwilling to risk the health of themselves and their family to fulfill God's call on their life.

The effects of forced termination were at least, very distressing, for the participants. That is, the results indicated clergy experienced symptoms of trauma and anxiety. It would be important for future researchers to study this issue in a clinical setting to more accurately determine the mental health effects of forced termination. Job loss and forced termination do not meet the DSM-IV diagnostic criterion for being traumatic and are generally not thought of as traumatic events. However, participants in this study scored quite high on reliable measures of both PTSD and GAD. Future research should work to properly identify how distressing forced termination is to those who experience it. In addition, it is vital that denominations take a close look at the issue of forced termination and its far-reaching implications.

Forced termination is an issue that must be addressed by ministers, churches, seminaries, and denominational organizations. 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. It is important that Christian organizations recognize the problem and implement steps to increase awareness and solutions. Local churches should implement training for all those in leadership. Training should include how to recognize and appropriately deal with psychological abuse. It is important that seminaries include a course in degree plans for ministers that offer training in coping with psychological abuse. Perhaps, the most important implication for this research is that governing bodies that oversee many Christian ministers in the United States admit that this is an issue and take appropriate steps to protect those that are called to serve the Church.

Directions for Future Research

Future research focused on clergy who have experienced forced termination should employ the use of the Perceptions of Terminated Ministers scale—Revised (PTM-R). The scale is

new and needs more testing and development but, the PTM-R has provided a theoretical underpinning forced termination and burnout among clergy. Further, with the addition of the trauma construct, the PTM-R explained most of the variance related to mental health issues and forced termination. The five items measure the construct of trauma in the PTM-R contribute to understanding how devastating the process of forced termination is. Those items follow; (a) “I have painful memories of my termination experience,” (b) “Reminders of the event are physically distressing,” (c) “I have distressing dreams about my forced termination,” (d) “Negative thought about the event often reoccur,” and (e) “Reminders of the event are stressful.”

Little information is known about ministers who experience forced termination, but even less is known about the effects on the family members of clergy who experience forced termination and the immediate and long-term effects within churches who force a minister out. Future research should include members of the clergy family. Research should also be conducted that focuses on congregations involved with forced termination and examine the effects on the church and its congregation.

Not only does this project add significant information to the scholarly body of research on forced termination, it provides some important theoretical underpinnings for future research. This project implies a process of forced termination. Girard’s work on mimetic contagion (Girard 1965, 1979, 1987) may provide some explanation of this process. In this study, we discovered clergy who have been forcibly terminated experience conflict with small factions of the congregation. Perhaps, this conflict arises because of competition for control. Girard’s concept of mimetic desire (Girard 1965) in which desire is not unique to individuals but originates from the imitation of others. A triangular relationship is established between the object of desire (control of the local church), the model of desire, and the imitator of desire. This type of relationship provides the foundation for conflict as both minister and faction become competitors for control.

As competition for control of the church increases, the potential for viciousness escalates between the minister and faction. This viciousness operationalizes itself as mobbing (Leymann 1996; Leymann and Gustafsson 1996). The level of mobbing the people experience can vary. However, mobbing is highly contagious as indicated by Girard’s (1979, 1995) work on mimetic contagion. Mobbing includes some level of psychological harassment, usually directed at one person. Some ministers may choose to ‘fight back’ in the battle over control. As the two maneuver for control, there are only two potential outcomes; the two destroy one another, or a scapegoat is killed (Girard 1986; Greenfield 2001). This process culminates when the minister (scapegoat) is left with no other choice but to leave the church, either being fired or forced to resign. Subsequently, the minister experiences long-term detrimental effects. While the authors call attention to some important elements to the process of forced termination, more research is needed to understand forced termination. Future research should be conducted which examines the elements of forced termination as a process and focuses on developing a theory of forced termination.

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