

Summer 2011

Staff Terminations in the Church: A Beastly Endeavor

James Shoopman

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, shoopf68@erau.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/publication>



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Scholarly Commons Citation

Shoopman, J. (2011). Staff Terminations in the Church: A Beastly Endeavor. *Christian Ethics Today*, 18(3). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/publication/608>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

Christian Ethics Today

A Journal of Christian Ethics Volume 18, Number 3 Aggregate Issue 83 Summer 2011

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" Isaiah 40:3; John 1:23

- A Little Disagreement is Good for the Soul** *Patrick R. Anderson, Editor*.....2
- A Response to Rev. Bruce Lowe and His 'Six Truths'** *Howard Batson*.....3
- The Secularization of the Cross** *Martin E. Marty*7
- The Freedom of the Jewish Pulpit** *Stephen S. Wise*.....8
- Is a 'Free Pulpit' an Oxymoron?** *Hardy Clemons*..... 11
- The Interfaith House that Dove Built** *By Gregory Magruder*..... 14
- Does America Need Ayn Rand or Jesus?** *By Gary Moore*..... 16
- Looking at Homosexuality from Another Angle** *John R Tyler*..... 18
- Civil Unions by Another Name:** *David J. Dunn*..... 21
- A Better Unity: A Biblical Illustration of Community** *Reggie Williams*.....23
- A Torturous Decision** *Alexander Patico*..... 24
- "Staff Terminations in the Church: A Beastly Endeavor"** *Jim Shoopman*...26
- BOOK REVIEWS**
- A Religious History of the American Revolution** *Reviewed by Darold Morgan*..... 29
- Evolving in Monkey Town:** *Reviewed by Marion Aldridge* 29
- A Young People's History of the United States** *Reviewed by K. Hollyn Hollman*31



KUDZU *by Doug Marlette*

Staff Terminations in the Church: A Beastly Endeavor

By Jim Shoopman

I used to teach a Sunday morning Bible study class before worship in the board room of the Children's Advocacy Center, an organization dedicated to helping children who have been abused in various ways. Our startup church rented space from this social service agency. In that boardroom the administrators of the Children's Advocacy Center often display exceptional artwork created by the children who work through their fears and tears with colored pencils and crayons. One of the pictures I found most moving was of a monster wolf, huge, hideous, slaving and bearing down on its prey. The caption under the picture, written by the 8-year-old boy who drew it, says "This is the beast that hurts people."

I suspect I have felt a similar beast on the prowl in Christian congregations more often than any of us should have. Perhaps you too have seen abusive and overly authoritarian pastors dismissed. Predatory church members are sometimes openly "disfellowshipped" or privately "disinvited." However, even such measures on the part of a congregation may sometimes become the use and abuse of power. We do not always recognize the abuse of power when we see it.

To explain how we sometimes miss seeing the misuse of power, let me first define "power." Power is nothing more than the ability to make things change or the ability to keep things as they are. Everyone has some power, and, indeed, everybody needs some — in the home, in the workplace, and in the church.

A very wise director of missions I knew, Dr. Robert Perry, once published an excellent little book on church dynamics called *Pass the Power Please*.¹ In many ways "power" is a morally neutral concept, and the desire for power is not evil in itself. Many people seek power in order to

make things better. We generally only accuse someone of being "power hungry," in the insulting sense, if we do not agree with that person's goals. When used for the benefit of others, power is a gift of God. In that sense, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Lottie Moon were powerful people in different ways. The key question is: what do we want power for in our religious institutions?

This issue of religious motivation was first explored scientifically by Dr. Gordon Allport in his early psychology-of-religion landmark work, *The Individual and His religion*. In this work Allport suggested that

This abuse of power is typically accomplished through the power to hire and fire. This use of economic control is a potent process.

there are two types of motives for religious behavior. He eventually came to refer to these motives as *intrinsic* and *extrinsic*.² Persons drawn to religious life by intrinsic motives are attracted to the spiritual benefits actually promised by the religion such as meaning, hope, forgiveness and moral guidance. Persons drawn to religious life by extrinsic motives are drawn by the byproducts of institutional religious success such as business contacts, social "respectability," and a place to be important or exercise authority. Theoretically, we can imagine individuals who are drawn to religious institutions exclusively by either intrinsic or extrinsic motives, but in the real world most of us are a mixed bag, drawn to churches and other reli-

gious institutions for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. As much as we love God, we also love having a sense of community and corporate achievement with likeminded believers, and we are drawn to places where we can do things that matter and thus feel more important. The more acceptable language for this is that we seek "significance." All of this is perfectly normal.

That being granted, some church leaders are more "extrinsically" motivated than others, and therein lies the problem. The desire to keep a church financially stable, the desire to attract a specific demographic to the church, the desire to change worship styles or keep them the same, the desire to avoid the tensions inherent in conflict, and many other matters extrinsic to the religion itself, may cause a leader to rationalize hurtful actions as being ultimately virtuous because those actions are, in the end, "for the good of the church." In the intense desire to see this through, a church leader may well abuse the power of office or influence. This abuse of power is typically accomplished through the power to hire and fire. This use of economic control is a potent process. I have been both its victim and its enabler.

An elderly African-American woman cooked Wednesday night suppers for a large church where I served for a time as Associate Pastor. Her meals were becoming increasingly salty, and complaints were frequent. The Kitchen Committee was assigned to my area of administrative oversight, as the church's chief administrator, so the unenviable task of getting her to change this fell in my purview. She ignored all my entreaties to use less salt, so at the next meeting of the kitchen committee I was told to fire her. I had never fired anyone before in my life, and it did not go especially well. I called her on the phone to tell

her of the committee's displeasure, and she angrily quit before I could say the words I'd planned, "We'll have to let you go."

Mind you, the church had a perfect right to dismiss her — they certainly had a right to healthy and good tasting meals on Wednesday nights. I do not question that, but I was untrained in the dismissal of personnel, I wish I had gone to see her personally instead of phoning her, and I still wish our church had some system in place to deal with staff dismissals in a more humane and compassionate fashion.

This was an elderly woman who clearly needed the income from this work or she would not have been there. She'd been a part of the church's life for some years. A greater effort to fight for her job, finding another job she could do with equal dignity, providing a severance package, a kinder and gentler good-bye — any of that would be more becoming of an institution existing in Christ's name. Instead, she was "just a cook," an easily replaceable worker bee, and countless cooks, custodians and church secretaries have been disposed of in equally cursory fashion by churches of every stripe over the years.

With swift karmic force my fate followed hers a few months later in that same church. Over the course of two years I was told by two lay-leaders that I was not performing up to the congregations' standards and should resign quietly for the sake of the church. By the time I asked about the opportunity to discuss my side of these matters with the personnel committee, the pastor had already discussed the matter with those lay-leaders and he informed me that the members of the personnel committee were all in agreement with the asking for my resignation. The pastor told me in almost these very words, "If you resign immediately and quietly you'll receive a three month's severance package. If you don't, I cannot guarantee what will happen." This was the power of economic reward and the threat of punishment.

My story is not unique. Dr. Charles Chandler, the founder and direc-

tor of the Ministering to Ministers Foundation, a support organization for forcibly terminated ministers, reports this to be the most common pattern of dismissal. In a 1997 article from *The Servant*, a quarterly journal of Chandler's Ministering to Ministers Foundation, Rev. Everett Goodwin published an article entitled "Forced Terminations and Ethics." In that article he says,

"The most frequent violation [of ethical codes of conduct] is in the failure to observe established procedures and processes for evaluation, conflict resolution or review in pastoral relationships. Terminations commonly are accomplished without a meeting of the pastoral relations committee, diaconate or church board taking place. Instead, small groups or powerful individuals often accomplish their

Church constitutions provide ample information on the appropriate ways to call or hire church staff, but typically very minimal information on how dismissals are to be conducted.

purpose by private meetings or conversations followed by the use of threats, intimidations, or enticements designed to encourage a pastor to resign...Following a successful forced termination, ethics are sometimes also compromised when reports regarding the cause of terminations are distorted or misrepresented by church members or boards..."³

Ministers treated in this fashion are usually encouraged to leave quietly and peacefully "for the good of the church." If they do, they are often promised a severance package in

return for this silence. Of course custodians, cooks and secretaries are almost never offered such a generous parting gift. The ministers who face the ultimatums are usually hurt and confused. They often accept these terms out of fear and a broken heart.

We speak of "Christian" ways to conduct marriage, raise children, seek entertainment, support churches and call pastors, but we seldom talk at any length about either Christian or sinful ways to hire and fire. Perhaps pastors feel it would sound self-serving to bring the matter up, but directors of missions, denominational staff, visiting seminary professors, and interim pastors could appropriately address such an issue without any undue embarrassment. The church's way of handling the business-end of employment relations is often modeled, without much thought, strictly on the business world around us.

Often, corporate rules of dismissal are far more rigorous than those of most churches. Church constitutions provide ample information on the appropriate ways to call or hire church staff, but typically very minimal information on how dismissals are to be conducted. Charles Chandler tells of the reaction of a corporate psychiatrist who had been asked to assist in a retreat designed to help ministers cope with their forced terminations. The psychiatrist was "...appalled as he heard the stories. He worked extensively with corporations in 'downsizing' and noted that none of them treated their employees like the churches treated the retreat participants."⁴

Church employees do not typically have the ordinary government protections against unlawful termination because the American courts have determined they will not adjudicate internal church disputes of this nature.⁵ This means that clergy in the United States do not have the same right of employees in the business world to sue for unlawful termination. This also means that only churches themselves can improve this situation. The church exists as a community of Christians who practice together living

as people of the Kingdom of God, so that when we get out into the world we will live differently. As such, our way of doing business must reflect that our "citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20).

Insensitivity to economic violence in the church is not restricted to any theological ideology. Liberal, conservative or moderate churches can fall victim to the temptation of economic abuse in dealing with personnel matters, particularly with non-ministerial church workers.

This issue is complicated by the very real fact that there are times when people need to be fired from church staffs, and fired fast. Sexual predators, embezzlers, psychological manipulators, verbally abusive leaders and hate mongers, all are a great danger to any congregation and any time a church employee truly violates congregational trust, the first act of healing is usually to remove the offender so the congregation can heal. It is vital that church leaders have the power to do this, and beyond that, every church has the right to hire whomever they find to be most helpful and in tune with their mission, and dismiss those they find to be least useful. But surely there is a more compassionate way to see to this business.

I believe we need a qualified body to write and publish a set of principles for how churches should conduct these matters. If all churches pledged to live by such a code, perhaps there would be fewer horror stories concerning the abuse of economic power "for the good of the church."

Every church staff member should be given a specific list, in writing, of things to correct, before churches take the step of dismissal. Every church staff member should have the opportunity to discuss accusations of deficiency with specific accusers. Churches should make *some* kind of severance package (and more decent salaries) available to custodians, cooks and church secretaries. It would be reflective of Jesus' admonition to "go the second mile" if we actively helped some terminated employees find new

and comparable employment.

Dismissal of church staff is usually a politically volatile act. Most church members only see the most public parts of any staff ministry, while more involved leaders and other staff must deal with the failures of a deficient staff member on a daily or weekly basis. Dealing with the "problem" more openly and honestly can be very dangerous for the church's money and morale.

*Liberal, conservative
or moderate churches
can fall victim to
the temptation of
economic abuse in
dealing with personnel
matters, particularly
with non-ministerial
church workers.*

But conscience demands that we accept the fact that the life and well-being of the unwanted staff member is also important. At the very least, we should treat such staff members as we would wish to be treated in the same situation. We are directly responsible for whether people in our employ can obtain food, clothing, shelter and medical care. That is not a morally neutral matter. Of course we have to have the right to hire and to fire, but when we hold the livelihoods of real people in our hands, the conscience must be engaged or we are not living as Christ directly commanded, when He said "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matt. 7:12). ■

¹Robert Perry, *Pass the Power Please: Lead by Empowering*, Richmond, Virginia: Organizational Health Associates, Inc., 1995.

²Gordon Allport, *The individual and his religion*, New York, Macmillan,

1950, especially p. 72. In this work Allport actually discussed "Mature" and "immature" religion, but in a later study refined the terminology to avoid evaluative judgments, referring instead to "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" religion, in the following work: Allport, G.W. & Ross, J.M., "Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1967, especially p. 434.

³Everett Goodwin, "Forced Terminations and Ethics," in *The Servant*, Richmond VA, Ministering to Ministers Foundation, Vol. 2 Issue 1, February 1997, p. 1. Since 1994 the Ministering to Ministers Foundation has done a masterful job of providing support, legal advice, fellowship and encouragement in the midst of the crisis of forced termination of clergy. The Foundation's website address is mtm.foundation.org and their phone number is 804-594-2556.

⁴Charles Chandler, "Is There a Rulebook on Forced Terminations," *the Servant*, Richmond, VA, Ministering to Ministers Foundation, Vol. 5, Issue 4, October 2000, p. 1.

⁵Richard R. Hammar, J.D., LL.M., CPA, "Termination of Clergy," *Church Law and Tax Report*, 1998,

<http://www.churchlawtoday.com/private/library/pcl/p02d.htm>.

James Shoopman is Professor of Comparative Religions and Ethics at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University