



Understanding Pastoral Termination

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Dear friends,

Pastors' Hope Network is committed to caring for pastors and their families who suddenly find themselves pushed out of their ministry positions. As I speak to individuals and groups about the topic of pastoral termination, I invariably encounter several reactions: raised eyebrows, innuendo, and the implication that pastors who lose their ministry position somehow deserve their fate.

The skeptics blame the pastors who have been pushed out. "Well, they must have done something wrong. Otherwise, the church would not have forced them out."

Research shows that nearly 1 out of 3 ministers will lose their ministry position through no fault of their own.

Oh, how wrong those skeptics are.

Conversations with Christian leaders have made it abundantly clear that many people do not understand what's behind the loss of a ministry position. They especially

do not understand the phenomenon of pastoral termination. Misconceptions abound.

These conversations convicted me that something had to be done to educate Christians about pastoral termination. Deacons, elders, church attendees, denominational leaders, and pastors themselves need to understand what is happening to pastors.

This booklet is the result of that conviction. I am indebted to Marcus Tanner, PhD, for his scholarly research on pastoral termination while at Texas Tech University. Everything you read here is based on research, personal experience, and anecdotal evidence as seen in our clients at Pastors' Hope Network.

After reading *Understanding Pastoral Termination*, please reach out to me directly if you would like to know more about the ministry of Pastors' Hope Network.

Sincerely yours,

Deanna Harrison, *Executive Director*
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P A R T O N E

DEFINING THE ISSUE



**Pastors who lose
their ministry
position—
lead pastors
and associate
pastors—fall into
1 of 2 groups:**

GROUP 1

The first group consists of pastors who have been **fired**. Being fired means losing a ministry position for justifiable reasons such as mismanaging funds, ongoing poor performance, having a moral failure, or behaving in an unethical manner. These pastors often make the headlines, especially if they serve at large churches. The event is also referred to as being fired for cause.

GROUP 2

The second group consists of pastors who lose their ministry position through no fault of their own – i.e. without cause. Some in this group lose their ministry position when they find themselves on the wrong end of situations such as staff restructuring, church closing, budget cuts, or a new lead pastor arrives and wants to bring in his or her staff. Sometimes these

pastors are asked to officially **resign**. But the bottom line is that these pastors have lost their ministry positions for unfortunate reasons that have nothing to do with anything immoral, illegal, or unethical.

Some pastors join this group when they walk away from a ministry position because their church culture is so toxic that it is endangering their well-being or the well-being of their families.

Other pastors in this group have been **forcibly terminated**. They, too, have lost their ministry position through no fault of their own. However, according to the scholarly research of Marcus Tanner, PhD, pastors who are forcibly terminated lose their ministry position after experiencing a brutal process that includes “psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual abuse.”¹ The reasons behind a forced termination are subjective and often leave the pastor

never knowing exactly what went wrong. Since the abuse is typically carried out by a small group of powerful people, most of the congregation is left in the dark. As author and worship pastor Dave Gipson says, it’s as though their pastor has been abducted by aliens.²

The staggering fact is that nearly 1 out of 3 pastors will experience forced termination at least once.³

Let’s put it another way. *Nearly 1 out of 3 pastors will experience psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual abuse ending in the loss of their ministry position having never done anything immoral, illegal, or unethical.* When all the dust settles, the cause of termination typically has to do with things such as personality conflict, leadership styles, and power struggles. In healthy churches, all parties involved work toward healthy solutions. When a

pastor is forcibly terminated, however, underlying issues are ignored rather than addressed in constructive ways.

Since 2019, Pastors' Hope Network has provided resources to hundreds of pastors who have lost their ministry positions throughout the US and Canada. The need is enormous. What an honor it is to walk alongside ministry families and provide support as they seek to hear God's voice and discern His will for their lives.

¹Tanner, Marcus. "Clergy Who Experience Trauma as a Result of Forced Termination." *Journal of Religion and Health*, published online 2012.

²Gipson, Dave. "Abducted by Aliens." Republished with permission at <https://pastorshopenetwork.org/abducted-by-aliens/>.

³Tanner, Marcus. "Forced Termination of American Clergy: Its Effects and Connection to Negative Well-Being." *Review of Religious Research*, published online 2011.



P A R T T W O

RECOGNIZING
THE PROCESS
THAT LEADS
TO PASTORAL
TERMINATION



If you've never been unjustly forced out of a ministry position, you may be surprised to discover The Process behind pastoral termination. In the secular workplace, The Process is known as Mobbing. The similarities between Mobbing and The Process used by church leadership to get rid of a pastor are alarming. Anyone concerned about a pastor's well-being must learn to recognize signs of The Process or else risk being used by the perpetrators. Consider the following comparison:

WORKPLACE MOBBING*

VS

THE PROCESS OF PASTORAL TERMINATION*

- **Mobbing** involves a group of people who work together to force out a co-worker.
- **Mob** leaders conduct unofficial interviews with the victim's co-workers, gathering information by using gossip, innuendo, and leading questions. This information is used to create a false narrative against the victim.
- **Mobbing** takes place in secret.
- **Mobbing** lacks due process.
- **Mobbing** focuses on the victim's personality and character, with the intent to destroy.
- When victims of **Mobbing** discover what's taking place, they believe their friends, co-workers, supervisors, and/or HR will come to their defense.

- **The Process** is orchestrated by a group of church members with the purpose of forcing out a pastor.
- Those orchestrating **The Process** of Pastoral Termination gather information based on gossip, innuendo, and strategic conversations. This information is used to create a false narrative against the pastor.
- **The Process** takes place in secret.
- **The Process** lacks due process.
- **The Process** focuses on the pastor's personality and character, with the intent to destroy.
- When pastors discover that **The Process** is being carried out, they believe people in their congregation will reject the lies and come to their defense.

- **The Mob** prevents victims from answering their accusers because they know “the victim’s silence is essential to protecting the perpetrators from liability.”
- **Mobbing** victims are unaware of the investigation against them until it’s too late.
- Once the victim of **Mobbing** is terminated, observers blame the victim rather than examining the company to determine underlying problems.
- Victims of **Mobbing** are usually ostracized by the people they counted on to defend them.
- “**Mob** victims suffer deep levels of traumatization due to the large-scale ostracization, character assassination, abandonment by colleagues, and upper management’s involvement in the attacks.”

* Quotations and details on workplace mobbing are based on the article “Are You Being Mobbed at Work?” by Dorothy Suskind PhD. Published online in *Psychology Today* December 31, 2020.

- Pastors are often not given the opportunity to confront their accusers and when they are, they often remain silent. Why? Because they refuse to use the weapons used against them such as gossip, slander, and lies.
- The pastor is usually unaware that **The Process** is being carried out until it’s too late.
- Once pastors are terminated, observers blame them rather than acknowledging that **The Process** is unbiblical and sinful. The church leaders ignore underlying problems.
- Pastors who are terminated are usually ostracized by those they believed would defend them.
- Pastors who experience **The Process** suffer deep pain and trauma due to the abandonment by friends, church members, and denominational leaders. The silence from the people they thought they could count on is the ultimate betrayal.

* Much of the information on the process of pastoral termination is based on the extensive research of Marcus Tanner, PhD, as well as anecdotal information from Pastors’ Hope Network clients.

The Process is nothing new. The Pharisees perfected it as they planned their attack on Jesus. A quick read through the Gospels reveals their strategy: secret meetings (Matt. 12:14; 22:15), listening carefully for anything that could be used against Jesus (Mark 12:13), watching and waiting (Luke 6:7), plotting (Matt. 26:3-4), recruiting people to lie (Matt. 26:59), and manipulating and stirring up observers (Mark 15:11). And of course, there is the abandonment by Jesus' disciples at a time when He needed them most.

Experiencing The Process is extremely harmful to pastors and their families. The long-term effects can last for years, as we'll discover in Part 4. Pastors and their families desperately need people who will love and support them as they strive to heal. That's why there's Pastors' Hope Network.



P A R T T H R E E

IDENTIFYING
THE REASONS
FOR
PASTORAL
TERMINATION

By now you may be wondering what would cause church leaders to initiate The Process against their pastor.

Researchers have identified several reasons for pastoral termination including leadership style, power struggles, church politics, and church conflict. Just about any grievance a disgruntled individual has against the pastor will fall into one of these categories.

The Process begins “when personal relationships between certain members of the church and the minister go awry.”¹ When this happens, The Process goes into full swing and the pastor (and oftentimes the pastor’s spouse) will be subjected to a variety of abuse at the hands of those orchestrating The Process.

One pastor’s story illustrates The Process well. With his permission, I want to share part of his story with you. For the sake of confidentiality, I’ll call him Pastor Jack.

His parishioners called him Pastor Jack or Dr. Jack. Even though they were on a first-name basis, they always addressed him with love and respect.

Unbeknownst to Pastor Jack, a staff member

became upset with him. Rather than going directly to Pastor Jack to discuss the issue, the staff member began holding secret meetings with fellow staff members and influential church leaders. The group began plotting what can only be described as a coup.

Weeks after the secret meetings began, Pastor Jack attended an out-of-town denominational conference. While away, he received an email from someone involved in The Process. The bottom line: they wanted Pastor Jack gone.

There was no due process. Minds were made up.

Pastor Jack immediately left the conference and returned home. When he arrived at the church, he went to each individual staff member’s office with the hope of discovering what was wrong and working toward a solution. But instead of a solution, the psychological and emotional abuse began. As Pastor Jack entered each office, he was met with the same response: eerie silence as each staff member sat tight-lipped, refusing to say a single word.

The psychological and emotional abuse

continued when Pastor Jack was called into an official meeting. There the staff members and elders referred to him as Dr. Smith. Never in all his years at the church had Pastor Jack been called Dr. Smith, only Pastor Jack or Dr. Jack. As the staff made their accusations, it became obvious they had been coached. One by one, they laid out their charges. And one by one, they used identical words and phrases. Clearly, the staff had rehearsed their lines.

The emotional abuse continued when denominational leaders refused to return Pastor Jack's phone calls and emails. It was later learned that those who carried out The Process had rewritten Pastor Jack's narrative, not only for church members but for denominational leaders as well. Not one person ever asked for his side of the story. Pastor Jack's reputation had been destroyed.

If The Process that leads to pastoral termination sounds too horrible to be true, I assure you that it is very real. At Pastors' Hope Network, we hear our clients' stories of trauma and we see their ongoing pain. It's a pain that has long-term effects on pastors, their spouses, and their children. We'll address these issues in Part 4.

¹Tanner, Marcus. "Learning from Clergy Who Have Been Forcibly Terminated." *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 2016.

P A R T F O U R

THE
LONG-TERM
EFFECTS
OF FORCED
TERMINATION



Forced termination—the process of removing pastors from their ministry positions that involves emotional, spiritual, social, and psychological abuse¹—impacts pastors and their families for many years following the event. The experience is far more than losing a job. It’s not something they just “get over.” Pastors lose their faith community, social community, and work community, as do their spouse and children.

The extensive research of Marcus Tanner, PhD, reveals that “Forced termination is extremely detrimental to the overall well-being of clergy.”²

Consider these effects of forced termination:³

- Psychological distress
- Depression
- Increased Stress
- Low self-esteem
- Low self-confidence
- Physical health problems
- Inability to trust people, especially church people
- Long-term financial instability
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Other effects of forced termination include isolation, loneliness, relocation, and grief. In his 2023 report on loneliness and isolation, the U.S. Surgeon General stated, “Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual

and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity.”⁴

Without question, pastoral termination is extremely harmful. At Pastors’ Hope Network, we hear the stories and witness the devastating impact of forced termination on the entire family. Pastors’ kids find themselves moving to new schools, leaving their old friends behind, and struggling to adapt to new activities, peer groups, and extra-curricular teams. One pastor’s son had to move in the middle of his senior year in high school. Another pastor and his wife made the difficult decision to leave their high school senior behind with friends so that she could finish the year with her graduating class.

We also hear the stories of trauma that lead to PTSD. Pastors’ spouses talk about being unable to enter a church building.

Others have difficulty trusting people, even 15 or 20 years after the termination event. Understandable, considering The Process they endured that led to termination.

A common response I hear when I share about forced termination is not “How can we help these pastors heal and get back into ministry?” but rather “We need to work on prevention.” The implication, at least by some, is that “These pastors are already broken. Let’s focus on the well-being of pastors who have not been terminated.”

Yes, we should care about pastoral well-being. But we must also care for pastors who have been wounded by forced termination. While medical researchers work on preventing cancer, some

oncologists care for patients who *already* have cancer. In the same way, we need to promote the well-being of active pastors **and** care for pastors who have experienced forced termination. **We must have both.** Otherwise, any discussion on the health and well-being of pastors is incomplete.

¹Tanner, Marcus. “Clergy Who Experience Trauma as a Result of Forced Termination.” *Journal of Religion and Health*, published online 2012.

²Tanner, Marcus. “Forced Termination of American Clergy: Its Effects and Connection to Negative Well-Being.” *Review of Religious Research*, published online 2011.

³Tanner, Marcus. “Clergy Who Experience Trauma as a Result of Forced Termination.” *Journal of Religion and Health*, published online 2012.

⁴Murthy, Dr. Vivek H., “Letter from the Surgeon General” in *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation 2023*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.



P A R T F I V E

DISMISSING A
PASTOR WITH
LOVE AND
GRACE

Maybe one day there will be no need for Pastors' Hope Network.

But I doubt it.

There will always be situations where a church must dismiss a pastor. Sometimes a parting of ways is the healthiest thing for the pastor and church alike. *The key is to do it right.*

Doing it right involves measures that might even prevent a dismissal.

Doing it right might lead to reconciliation and restoration.

Consider these 7 strategies for dealing with difficult situations and the possible termination of a pastor:

1. Reflect the Character of God.

Whether church leaders are in the prevention stage, reconciliation/restoration stage, or dismissal stage with a pastor, every step should reflect the character of God.

His Word spells out how we are to treat one another:

- “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).
- “So, in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12).
- “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Eph. 4:29). Conversations that consist of complaining and grumbling against the pastor or staff are blatant sin. They must stop.



Bottom line: Churches should treat their pastors with respect and dignity, even if dismissal is unavoidable.

2. Have Godly Leadership.

Churches need people in leadership roles whose lives demonstrate that they are committed to living out the Scriptures. If churches are going to deal with difficult situations and possibly dismiss a pastor, they must have leaders who are committed to following biblical teaching. Family name or size of bank account are not qualifications for church leaders.

3. Commit to a Rational Response.

Joshua 22 tells the story of a time when the tribes of Israel had a huge misunderstanding. Side One was ready to go to war against Side Two. Side Two didn't even realize they'd upset Side One. Thankfully, before going to war, Side One sent a delegation to talk with Side Two.

If you read all of Joshua 22, you'll discover these 6 vital steps of a rational response that ultimately prevented bloodshed:

- Listen
- Investigate
- Listen some more
- Keep an open mind
- Gather all facts
- Make a decision

4. Develop Clear, God-honoring HR Policies.

Keeping #1 above in mind, develop clear HR policies that include regular performance reviews. The purpose of performance reviews is to develop an improvement plan when needed. And the whole purpose of the performance improvement plan is to give pastors a chance to improve. Give the Holy Spirit time to work rather than rushing to dismissal.

5. Work toward solutions.

Provide guidance, coaching, counseling – whatever is needed to help the pastor succeed. Work toward a solution. There should be multiple conversations with the

pastor before a dismissal process begins. If the pastor is blindsided, then Jesus' clear instructions in Matthew 18 have been ignored and that is sin on the part of church leadership.

If after working toward a solution it becomes necessary to dismiss a pastor, do it with love and grace.

6. Provide Time.

Dismissing a pastor with love and grace means giving them time to find another job before they must leave. If the pastor has done something immoral, illegal, or unethical, then yes, the dismissal should be immediate. Otherwise, give them time to find other employment. It is extremely difficult for an unemployed pastor to find work of any kind, so avoid putting them in that position.

7. Provide a Severance.

Dismissing a pastor with love and grace means providing them with a generous severance that includes health insurance and counseling *for every member of the family*. If

the pastor's family lives in a church-owned home, allow them to remain there for an extended period. Relocating, whether the pastor buys or rents, requires employment, and finding employment takes time.

Losing a ministry position is devastating for pastors and their families. Depending on how a church handles the matter, the dismissal may very well end a pastor's ministry altogether. When looking for a new pastor, many churches will not consider a pastor who has been dismissed from a previous church. Other pastors and their spouses are so traumatized by the way a church has treated them that they walk away from church ministry altogether.

So, church leaders, as retired pastor and blogger Joe McKeever puts it, "If you are going to fire a preacher, you'd better have good reason, friend. Because you will face a holy God and account for your behavior."¹

Amen, Bro. Joe. Amen.

¹McKeever, Joe. "When to Fire a Pastor." Posted June 9, 2016. <https://joemckeeper.com/wp/fire-pastor/>

W H O W E S E R V E

Pastors' Hope Network serves pastors and their families from all Christian denominations throughout North America. Because many churches require pastors to sign NDAs in exchange for a severance, we do not ask pastors to give details regarding the loss of their jobs. We understand that they may not be free to give details. Regardless of why a pastor was let go, their needs are similar: they need counseling to help heal, expert guidance to avoid poor financial decisions, and employment assistance to land a job and provide for their families. So, the question we ask our clients is not "How did this happen?" but rather "How can we help?" We exist to pick up the wounded, provide stabilizing resources, and put them on the road to healing. We invite you to join us in our mission.

P A S T O R S ' H O P E N E T W O R K

MISSION STATEMENT

Striving to bear one another's burdens, Pastors' Hope Network provides loving, comprehensive support for displaced or terminated pastors as they seek God's healing and direction.

VISION STATEMENT

A collaborative network of churches, nonprofits, businesses, and counseling services that provides comprehensive support for displaced or terminated pastors and their families.

Pastors' Hope Network provides practical resources to pastors and their families following the loss of a ministry position:

- Counseling for the whole family
- Resume & job search assistance
- Vocational assessment
- Temperament analysis
- Certified mediation
- Qualified financial guidance

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