

AVOID THE TOP FIVE REASONS FOR PASTORAL TERMINATIONS

by [Bob Sheffield](#) on Friday, May 09, 2008

I will give the top five causes of forced terminations (from the 2006 Forced Termination survey conducted by the Church Minister Relation's Directors network in cooperation with LifeWay Christian Resources) and offer several prevention strategies for each. While I cannot give you a guarantee that reading these articles and following the guidelines will prevent all forced terminations, I do believe these will help. We will begin with number five.

Cause 5: The church was already in conflict when the pastor arrived

Many pastors arrive at a new church to find a lot of unresolved and deeply emotional conflict beneath the surface. Here are three important but often overlooked facts about this type of destructive church conflict.

Fact # 1: These conflicts do not end when a pastor, leader, or group declares that the conflict is over.

Fact # 2: Church conflicts, which have resulted in strong emotional differences of opinions, are not resolved in a majority church vote.

In a majority vote situation, the majority voters may leave the meeting declaring, "We won!" The minority voters may leave with a feeling of, "we lost ... but we will get them next time." The next time may be a month, a year, or longer. As a result of this type of "win-lose" vote, I have observed church families with long standing distrust and built up resentment. When this happens, every vote, no matter how insignificant, becomes a "win-lose" vote.

A pastor who is unaware of this underlying and unresolved conflict may be unknowingly caught in the middle.

Fact # 3: Conflicts end when overwhelming majority of the people involved in the conflict permit them to end.

What does a pastor or staff member do to help prevent this type of forced termination from happening?

1. Take time to investigate and evaluate the church before you go.

- Research the church and ask probing questions of the search committee, other pastors in the community, as well as denominational leaders. Depending on your affiliation, these may include directors of missions, state convention leaders, or other denomination leaders.
- Ask about prior forced terminations and the reasons for them.
Read the church's constitution and note when the church made changes to the by-laws.

2. Evaluate yourself to see if you are prepared to help a church in conflict.

- Are you prepared spiritually, emotionally, and physically to come to the aid of a church which has unresolved conflict?
- **Do you have training, spiritual gifts, skills, or experience in conflict management?**
- Will you have access to someone who can mediate the conflict?
- Are you willing to commit to the length of time it will take to see this through to resolution?
- Do you have a strong base of support (family, mentors, and colleagues) to pray with you and to listen to you? You will need to vent and seek wisdom from time to time.

3. Seek and depend on the power of God's Holy Spirit to give you wisdom and power beyond yourself.

Cause 4: The pastor's leadership style is too strong.

Church leaders and members can have the perception that the pastor has a leadership style that seeks to have everything his way. In some instances, this is a reality more than a perception. A pastor continually walks a fine line between exercising too little and too much leadership authority. This particular cause speaks to a situation where the pastor steps over this line and exercises more of a dictator style of leadership.

What are some reasons for this happening?

Reason #1: You, as a person, have difficulty allowing others to share in decision making.

- You feel it slows the process down too much.
- You don't trust other people to make the right decisions.
- You have a perfectionist approach to accomplishing projects.
- You don't do advance planning and have to do too much in too short a period of time.

Reason #2: Since the church is growing, you assume that the church leaders and members approve of your leadership style.

Reason #3: The style worked in your last pastorate and you feel that it will work in every pastorate.

Reason #4: You measure your pastoral success through accomplishing a series of tasks rather than enabling people. As pastors, we sometimes forget that the church is not a task to accomplish

but people to lead. In the Bible, the description of the church does not include how smoothly the organization runs but how people respond to Christ and grow in His likeness.

Reason #5: You have a mentor or follow the example of a successful pastor who used a dictator or strongly directive leadership style. A benevolent dictator is still a directive, controlling leader.

How can you guard against having too strong a leadership style?

1. Remember that some people may think your leadership style is too strong because you don't do what they want done at all times.

- This tension will always exist in your life as a pastor. You cannot completely stop this from happening but you can come to accept this as an inevitable reality.

2. Have a healthy understanding of the difference between a manager and a leader.

- A manager exercises a sphere of control to insure the accomplishment of tasks. The successful accomplishment of tasks rather than enabling the people involved in the accomplishment constitutes the priority concern of a manager.
- A leader influences people to follow him in the accomplishing together what they could not accomplish alone. A good leader helps those who follow him to manage the processes necessary to task accomplishment but does not try to control them.

3. Learn to delegate properly. This does not mean you will leave everything to someone else but you will not feel you have to do everything even in a single staff church.

- Identify and train volunteer leaders within the church.
- Trust these leaders and be sure they know you do.
- Learn to begin any project early enough that you have time to delegate.

4. Resist the temptation to exhibit a "Me" complex.

- The focus of our leadership should be to accomplish God's purposes for the church in order to honor God. We don't do what we do as a pastor for our glory and honor.
- God calls us to lead as servant leaders. Servant leaders seek to be servants first and let their leadership grow out of this.
- Jesus serves as our model servant leader.

5. Commit yourself to the discipline of continuing to learn proper leadership principles.

Consider the following resources:

- [*The Good Book on Leadership: Case Studies from the Bible*](#) by John Borek, Danny Lovett, and Elmer Towns
- *Get A Life! It IS About You* by Reggie McNeal
- [*Influencing Like Jesus: 15 Biblical Principles of Persuasion*](#) by Michael Zigarelli

Cause 3: The pastor has poor people skills

I believe that good people skills are foundational for effective pastoral ministry. Since these skills are open to a wide range of interpretations, I will define people skills as “the ability of a pastor to minister effectively to and through people.”

Here are **four reasons** I believe pastors struggle in relating to their church family.

Reason #1: Some pastors struggle with the role of a “shepherd of the flock who ministers to and through people.”

In the book, [*O Shepherd, Where Art Thou?*](#) Calvin Miller indicates that this struggle is, “rooted in the notion that a pastor’s main responsibility is the sermon.” Miller says, “The importance of the sermon cannot be dismissed, but it still is second to the pastor’s commitment to live in the world and represent at every moment of the week the will of the Savior.”

Reason #2: Some pastors don’t like people.

In one of Charles Schultz’ Peanuts cartoon, Lucy accuses her brother Linus of not loving his fellow man. “I love mankind,” was his indignant response. “It’s people I can’t stand.” Studies have shown that there are some pastors who don’t like to be around people. If you find yourself in this category of pastors, you probably find your fulfillment in your study rather than in the interaction with people.

Reason #3: Some pastors have been hurt.

Some of you have been hurt by people and you are seeking to insulate yourself from this happening again. You may now find it difficult to have a trust relationship with the members of your church family. This leads you to limit your interaction with people.

Reason #4: Some pastors fall into a people-pleasing trap.

You are a people pleaser and have encountered the hard truth that you can’t please all the people all the time. Read more about this struggle in the free article [How to Get Beyond the People-Pleasing Trap](#).

Tips for good people skills

1. Study the life of Jesus and learn how He related to people.

Reread the Gospel accounts that show how Jesus related to and worked with both followers and adversaries. The following books deal with the example of Jesus for your relationships:

- [*The Leadership Lessons of Jesus*](#) by Bob Briner and Ray Pritchard
- [*Influencing Like Jesus*](#) by Michael Zigarelli
- [*Jesus on Leadership*](#) by C. Gene Wilkes
- [*The Character of Leadership*](#): Nine Qualities That Define Great Leaders by Jeff Iorg

2. Consider these truths about pastoral leadership...

- You will not be able to get along with everybody all the time.
- Everybody has one or more difficult persons in their lives.
- You can't change people; only God can. You will have to learn how to relate to people as they are.
- People are not perfect and therefore will disappoint and even hurt you from time to time.

3. Have a proper understanding of what it means for God to call you to pastor His church.

Here are a couple of books that will help you to evaluate your call to ministry.

- [*Is God Calling Me? Answering the Question Every Leader Asks*](#) by Jeff Iorg
- [*O Shepherd, Where Art Thou?*](#) by Calvin Miller

4. Get feedback from trusted advisors.

Develop an informal feedback group of trusted advisors within the church and periodically ask them to evaluate how you relate to the congregation. (Learn How to Start a Pastor-Church Relations Team.) People Skills Free Download PDF

5. Seek help in those areas of your life where you know you have a weakness in people skills.

There are conferences and consultations available from LifeWay as well from your state convention to help you. This article by Michael Zigarelli, author of *Influencing Like Jesus*, is a good place to start.

Free Download: [8 ways to improve your people skills](#) (110 kb PDF)

6. Thank God for the people of your church and pray individually for them.

Cause 2: The church is resistant to change

Most churches are resistant to change. Unfortunately the pastor often becomes the target of the opposition to a change because he is the leader.

At other times, however, the pastor himself causes undue difficulty because of his type of leadership during the change process. Understanding the following things will not necessarily insure against forced termination in a change resistant church but will cut down on the possibilities of it happening.

Four Reasons a church resists change

Reason #1: Congregational issues

- High value on tradition, fellowship, and maintenance.
- Ongoing church conflict.
- No official mission/vision statement.
- Congregational distrust of both volunteer and/or staff leadership.
- Power and control conflicts within the leadership team.

Reason #2: Personal issues

- Focusing on personal preferences, opinions, and comfort.
- Lacking understanding regarding the specific change.
- Seeking or keeping power/control as a primary motivation.

Reason #3: Cultural issues

- The impact of all changes in society.
- The view that the change is a compromise with worldly culture.
- The idealization of the past as the preferred future.

Reason #4: Fear/faith issues

Controlled a change resistant church to change appropriately.

Five ways to deal with a church resistant to change

1. Properly assess the church's attitude toward change.

- Find out as much as you can about the church's history regarding change. You can talk to a wide variety of congregation members. This will help you get a balanced view of the stance of the congregation toward change. The local Director of Missions or others who have worked with the church in the past can also provide helpful insight.
- Learn the identities of the gatekeepers to change in the congregation and assess how much they are willing to change.
- Look at the church's history of change issues.

2. Honestly evaluate your own motivation in suggesting change.

- Ask yourself some tough questions like, "Am I trying to build my resume or am I leading the church to fulfill its greatest possibilities for God's glory?"

3. Practice good change agent principles.

- Relate all change to the church's mission/vision.
- Earn the right to lead in big changes by leading in smaller, successful changes.
- Remember that too much change in too short a period of time can stress persons and groups of persons. As much as possible manage the rate of change. This requires patience because change usually takes longer than you expect.
- Involve those who will implement the change in the planning process.
- Communicate continuously the details of the change.
- Understand the part transitions play in all change processes.

4. Educate yourself in the skills of a good change agent by attending conferences and reading appropriate resources.

Some helpful books include the following:

Managing Transitions by William Bridges

Pouring New Wine into Old Wineskins by Aubrey Malphurs

[*Paul on Leadership: Servant Leadership in a Ministry of Transition*](#) by Gene Wilkes.

5. Remember that your role in the change God wants to bring in the church you pastor may be that of starting a change process that someone else completes.

Cause 5: Control Issues over "Who runs the church?"

"Pastor, this is our church and not yours and it is about time you realized this."

As a pastor, you probably have had something like this said to you over the course of your pastoral ministry. As pastors we can get caught up in a tug of war over power and control issues with specific individuals or groups in the church. Sometimes this happens before we realize it is happening. At other times we may try to deliberately challenge the exercise of power by these individuals and groups.

Depending on the circumstances and the people involved, you can find yourself facing forced termination. You can help to avoid this by heeding the following understandings and suggestions.

Understanding #1: Satan always tries to use power and control issues as a temptation to cause the church to lose focus and/or effectiveness on its real mission.

Understanding #2: God is supposed to "run" the church and not man. God established the church and sent Christ to establish the church through His blood and serve as the head of His church. No individual, not even the pastor, nor groups of individuals should seek to run the church.

Understanding #3: Individuals and groups within the church are granted great leadership authority and trust by the church because of their faithful service over the years. You will do well, if possible, to find ways to work with them instead of competing with them.

Understanding #4: In the typical Southern Baptist Church, the pastor is granted the privilege of temporary leadership because of his position. This does not mean the church as a whole will either completely trust or follow him. During this time he has to earn the right of leadership. Even if he earns this, however, it does not mean that the congregation will cease to seek the guidance of other trusted leaders in the congregation.

Understanding #5: Decisions within the church are best made through prayerful consideration as the church seeks God's leadership and not through dependence on mankind's wisdom, preferences, or opinions.

Suggestions to neutralize power and control issues

1. Serve as a servant leader.

The book, [*Jesus on Leadership*](#) by C. Gene Wilkes, will help you understand what this means. Practicing servant leadership will help you to resist the satanic temptation to let your ego rule you when power and control issues occur.

2. Learn to share ministry with volunteer leaders in the church.

Rather than going head to head with power groups within the church, seek ways to utilize their knowledge and influence for the good of the church's mission. This means that you have to spend time getting to know and earn the trust of these individuals. You will need to let God's Holy Spirit give you the patience that this requires.

3. Focus on what God can do through the church and not on building your own reputation or resume.

- Don't try to pastor your next church while pastoring your current one.
- "Pick your battles." Don't let your ego drive you to have to have your own way or be the authority in everything.

4. Accept the fact that some people will always resist your attempts at leadership and you will have to deal with them in love.

This does not mean giving in to them all the time but finding ways to disagree on a Christian level.

5. Pray unceasingly for God's guidance and power.

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