

FIRST PERSON: Anatomy of the firing of a pastor

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Please read these first few sentences before you look at the subheadings. I want to be clear about a few points.

First, some pastors are fired for moral failure. This article does not address that category of firing. Second, my article makes some church members the bad guys. I want to be clear that they are the exception and not the rule. Third, I realize that each firing has its unique characteristics. What you will read is a typical pattern, not a fixed sequence of events for every dismissal of a pastor.

This article reflects on seven phases of the firing of a pastor. I have worked with countless pastors who shared their stories with me. These phases are common in many of them. Also, I will use a recent conversation to provide a real narrative of a real pastor in a real church. I made some slight adjustments to protect the identities of the pastor and the church.

Phase 1: The Pastor Made a Decision a Power Broker Did Not Like.

This phase can begin with an individual or with a small group of members. It can be cumulative decisions or one decision. The church I'm using as my case study began with one person who had significant influence in the church. The pastor declined to recommend the power broker's family member for the open worship minister position.

Phase 2: The Power Broker Forms a Negative Coalition Against the Pastor.

At this point, the pastor has no idea that the power broker is working against him. He is still unaware that any opposition is taking place. The power broker never meets with the pastor. Instead, he goes directly to the personnel committee of the church. It is a strategic move by the power broker. He has considerable influence over five of the seven members. The other two are weak and will not question the power broker. Also, the personnel committee acts as the pastor's supervisor.

Phase 3: The Negative Coalition Gathers "Fake Facts" Against the Pastor.

The power broker never mentions the issue of his family member not being recommended for the worship minister position. Instead, he leads several of the members of the personnel committee to create a false narrative about the pastor. "He didn't visit Jane in the hospital when she had surgery." "He spoke rudely to Marion." "He made some decisions where he did not have authority." "People are saying that the pastor hardly ever works." "People are saying that he is not friendly to anyone." "People are saying that all the new members who have joined the church under his tenure are causing trouble."

Phase 4: The Negative Coalition Asks to Meet with the Pastor.

The pastor is caught off guard by the requested and unscheduled meeting with the personnel committee. The pastor contacted me (Thom) to ask if he should be worried. I told him that I was concerned and that he should be prepared even though he couldn't think of any reason why there would be a problem. The expressions and body language of the personnel committee immediately communicated a bad situation to the pastor when he came to the meeting, especially since he thought most of them were his friends.

Phase 5: The Negative Coalition Presents the Concerns to the Pastor and Asks for his Resignation.

All of the concerns were false and prefaced with these three cowardly words, "People are saying." The pastor's first thought is to fight the charges since he knows they are false, but the power broker makes a sinister comment without explanation, "If you do not resign, your family will suffer." The pastor accepts the four months of offered severance and signs a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). The NDA clearly stipulates that if he says anything negative about the church, he will lose his severance.

Phase 6: The Pastor Announces his Resignation the following Sunday during the Worship Service.

The NDA prevented him from saying anything other than that the dismissal was not due to moral failure. The church is stunned. The absence of any explanation causes the rumor mill to create multiple false narratives.

Phase 7: No One Comes to the Pastor's Defense.

This church is congregational in its polity. The personnel committee does not have the authority to fire a pastor without a congregational vote. Such is the reason the personnel committee demanded his resignation. Any member of the church could have met with the personnel committee and demanded transparency. But no one was willing to rock the boat. Pastors typically tell me that this phase is the most painful. One pastor called it "the sinful silence of the majority."

In this particular case, the pastor was able to receive a call to another church just as the severance ran out. Most pastors are not that fortunate. A number of pastors never return to vocational ministry after such a traumatic event. The pastor and his family are traumatized.

In most cases, the church that fires the pastors suffers as well, sometimes for years. One member of the church noted in my story told me, "I will regret forever that I did not speak up. It took me a year to ask my former pastor for forgiveness.

Since the evil event took place, it's like a cloud of darkness is over our church. I wonder if it will ever go away."

It is a sad story. It is a tragic story.

Sadly, it is a story that is much too common.