When You’re FORCED OUT

If the church says you’re a disposable pastor, where’s your future in ministry?

Name Withheld

I couldn’t believe it! What were they saying? “You have a lot of gifts, but it’s time to make a change. You’re not the one for this church. Your gifts don’t match our needs. Sorry, but it just isn’t a good fit. We think that it’s in the best interest of the church and yourself that you resign this week.”

I swallowed hard, but the speech continued. “The last year has gone well enough, but frankly, even if you could walk on water, it just wouldn’t be good enough. You are in a hole, and it will take too long to get out. The church needs a fresh start, and so do you. We want your resignation effective in six weeks, at the end of August, but we will pay you through the end of December. Any questions? Take a couple of days off to think it over. When you return, please turn in your resignation.”

I left that meeting stunned. With no warning, my whole world and all my security had dissolved in thirty minutes. My balloon had burst, and now I had to go home to my family and explain what happened.

The timing was terrible. We had just learned my wife was pregnant. We asked ourselves over and over: Where would we go? What would we do? What did God think he was doing?

As requested, I turned in my resignation. The next six weeks seemed the longest weeks of my life. Time dragged on while I went through the motions. Office work, staff meetings, worship services — what was the purpose?

We were on edge emotionally, never far from anger, bitterness, or tears. Talking to colleagues and church workers was difficult. The resignation allowed me the dignity of not having to say I was fired, but it didn’t ease the reality. How can I face these people? I wondered. Who knows the truth? Who wanted me out? I felt betrayed, but I didn’t know by whom.

Casual conversations were hard. How should we answer awkward questions like “What are you going to do next?” We would see acquaintances in a store and dodge to another aisle to avoid meeting them. When we couldn’t avoid people, we evaded their questions and became adept at changing the subject.

In September, we put our house up for sale. Winter would not be the time to sell a house — when trees, plants, and bushes are barren, and snow covers the ground. We figured if the house sold before we found a new position, we could find interim housing.

October proved excruciating. We had prayed for a job offer by October 1, but that date came and went. Some churches looked promising, but none invited us for interviews. Confidence began to waver. Outwardly we believed in a sovereign God, but inwardly we wondered.

Our house sold, unexpectedly, in just ten days. We could have seen that as a blessing, but in our frame of mind we saw it as more trouble. By the end of November, we would have no house, no means of support, and a baby on the way. What would we do? Where would we go? How would we explain this to
our parents and friends?

The month closed on a low note. Two churches that appeared promising and for which I had a desire said no on the same day. One said I did not “fit their personality profile.” (How could they know? I never had an interview!) The other wanted more experience.

Depressed, I decided to forsake the ministry and become a school teacher. I recalled four people over the years who had suggested I did not have the “gifts” or “heart” to be a pastor. Maybe they were right, I thought. Maybe God is moving me into a lay ministry. Would that be so bad?

Thanksgiving weekend we loaded up a truck and headed west. With no job prospects, we decided to move in with my parents temporarily. Saying goodbye to friends and neighbors, we attempted to be positive: “At least we’ll be home for the holidays.”

The day we arrived was the lowest point of my life. My stoic detachment unraveling, we unloaded our possessions and put them in storage. “I am not a loser,” I bitterly told my wife, “but I certainly feel like one.”

But that night, as if to counter my self-pity, I received an invitation to candidate for a staff position at a church in the Northwest. I had not thought much about my earlier contact with that church. I merely had gone through the motions, figuring they were looking for someone with more experience.

Thinking I was leaving the ministry allowed me to relax and be more natural about who I was, my goals, and my perspective on ministry. Consequently, it was the best interview I ever had. I felt a great freedom to be myself. If they didn’t like me, I had other options.

My wife and I thought and prayed a great deal about what to do, eventually deciding that I should keep both ministry and non-ministry options open until God clearly led us.

Eventually, I candidated and was called by the church as an associate pastor.

Seven months after being fired, I started this new ministry. We have settled in and adjusted to a new baby, a new ministry, and a new area. All these adjustments, however, were seasoned with the pain of the previous year. Here’s what I learned.

**Accept the Emotional Upheaval**

Being fired is a lot like going through a divorce or experiencing the death of a loved one. I ran the gamut of grief and emotions:
● **Denial.** This is a bad dream, and when I wake up, everything will be okay.

● **Anger.** Those fools, they’re so stupid! Well, it’s their loss, anyway. I hate them. How could they do this to me?

● **Depression.** I’m a loser. No one wants me. Maybe I should quit the ministry. I don’t need this abuse.

● **Acceptance.** I don’t have a clue as to what you’re doing, Lord, but I’ll trust you.

Grief affected both my wife and me, taking us about one year to work through our emotions.

We were constantly up and down. The first few weeks we rode the roller coaster of our emotions and held on for dear life. It was definitely a white knuckler, an “E ticket” ride. It took several months for us to level out. Holidays and special occasions were especially difficult as we thought back on how different things were in years past.

Once I began a new ministry, I adjusted more quickly than my wife. For me, being fired was a career crisis; a new job solved that problem and brought healing. For her, the loss of my job was a relational crisis. She gave up her friends, her home, the place where her children were born — where everything was familiar. Moving to a new location merely heightened the pain.

We still get lonely sometimes. Occasionally we wish we could have our old friends back, rather than having to build new relationships. We want new friends, but we find ourselves wary: *Will they turn against us? Will they support us when we need them?*

### Guard the Heart

A former colleague told me: “You have to guard your heart. Don’t let yourself become bitter.” This was probably the hardest thing for us to do.

Many times I had to say to myself: *Those who fired you are men of God. You trusted them in the past. Now you have to trust them again and believe they only want what is best.*

While I could mouth the words, it took months before I started to believe them. I still don’t understand the decision; sometimes I wonder if they made a mistake. But over time I’ve learned to accept the decision without blaming them.

### What Are the Real Reasons?

Most people don’t like confrontation. When they have to make a painful choice, they often cannot give the real reasons behind their actions.

My situation was no different. I was never given a specific reason why I was fired. They told me I wasn’t “a good leader,” that I didn’t “fit with the church.”

“What does that mean?” I asked frequently. But I was left to guess.

As I reflected on my situation and read several books on leadership and management, I realized I had been in a situation in which I was likely to fail. The church had created a new position; I was the first to fill it. While the church had a written job description, they also had an unwritten agenda. In some ways, the church was unclear about what it wanted. When they fired me, they knew I wasn’t what they wanted, but they had trouble being specific about what they needed.

Another factor: this was my first full-time position out of seminary. I really didn’t know what I was doing in the first couple of years. I made a lot of mistakes that I couldn’t recover from.

In addition, I discovered that I had missed the whole point of leadership. I learned too late that the primary responsibility of the leader is to articulate a vision for ministry and then rally the troops in that direction. Only after the fact did I learn that I had been busy managing, but I wasn’t leading. We had solid programs, but they weren’t all heading in the same direction.

I later had lunch with one of the church leaders, and he confirmed what I had learned. “You’ve hit it on the head. That’s it exactly.”

I came to see I had not been guilty of doing anything wrong in particular, but I simply had not done enough things right.

I concluded that since this was not a fair test of my abilities, I needed to try again. Finding the real reasons gave me permission to give ministry a second chance.

Initially I blamed the church for not helping me do the job, and I was angry about their casting me off. But after a year of thought, I began to think they may have been right. Maybe it hadn’t been a good fit. In my present position, I see how much better I can use my leadership gifts.

I thank God that he gave me a mini-sabbatical and
enrolled me in Leadership 101!

Weighing the Advice You Receive

I received a lot of advice — all kinds of opinions about what I should do. The one who told me I was fired intimated that I should not be in ministry. He suggested I look into other fields such as editing or writing. Another suggested I go back to school to become an elementary school teacher. Still another suggested I get vocational counseling to see where I belonged.

I also sought advice from people who knew me, and whom I trusted. What did they think of me teaching school? Most saw it only as an interim solution, that I would not be satisfied over the long haul.

I’ve been taught not to believe everything I hear, good or bad. I was learning, on the other hand, not to disregard criticism or advice just because it’s painful.

So I listened, letting others give me feedback on all the advice I was being given. Through this process I realized I still had much to offer in ministry, but I needed to be in a place that could make better use of my gifts.

Finding a Support System

After my job unraveled, we were left with a great sense of isolation. Our best friends had been other church staff members and their wives. After our forced resignation, we felt cut off.

We went through a period of great dryness. We stopped attending church because we knew people at most churches in the area, and we couldn’t bear the prospect of those awkward conversations. We weren’t running away from the church; it was people we wanted to avoid.

While we did not have any close friends in the city, we did have family and friends elsewhere who supported us. They listened to us. They cried with
us. They wrote and called us. A few church people, aware of what had happened, called to encourage us. Some took us out to lunch to ask how we were doing. One promised to pray that God would give us hope.

Shortly after being fired, my wife and I attended a couples’ conference. Many people there also promised to pray for us. They reassured us that God still had great things in store for us.

We were fortunate to have strong support even though much of it was miles away. We may have felt isolated and lonely, but the many who cared helped us survive.

Finding Ways to Invest Time

“I’ve been bored, and I’ve been busy. I’d rather be busy.” I now understand all too well what that means. Unemployment leaves you with time on your hands. We had to combat the temptation to spend our hours feeling sorry for ourselves. We discovered the value of time spent on worthwhile projects rather than television.

Initially, we did well. We painted and performed minor repairs, getting our house ready to sell. We went camping. We took care of projects that had long been put off. We went on a lot of walks and talked about the past and the future. We read material that would help prepare us for our next ministry. We worked hard to make our time profitable.

As the months ran on, however, the projects ran out. It became harder to fill our time with things to do. By the time the interim came to an end, we struggled with too much daydreaming and time wasting. We should have maintained a sense of schedule even if it meant just going to the library to read.

Getting Back to Work

During our wilderness sabbatical, we went camping by a shallow lake. My 3-year-old son lost his footing in the water and came up spluttering. After that, he was afraid to go swimming. We knew he needed to get back in the water to overcome his fear. We spent a year coaxing and encouraging him to get back in before he finally conquered his fear of swimming.

It was the same with me: I needed to get back in ministry. On one hand, I knew my failure was due to lack of experience. On the other hand, I had a great fear of failure. What if I get fired again? What if they were right? I needed to return to ministry to overcome my fear of failure and put the lessons I had learned into practice.

Larger Lessons Linger

Believing God is in control of my life, believing that nothing takes him by surprise, believing his plan is for believers to become more like Jesus— all this helped me weather this storm. Through it, God strengthened me and developed my character— the most basic lesson of all.

I learned, for instance, to live more by faith. God, with a touch of humor, taught me from one of my own sermons. Three days before the church fired me, I preached from Hebrews 11:7 on Noah’s faith: because it was centered on God, he could trust God for the unseen. Then I had to put the sermon into practice, as if God said, “You’ve taught it; now live it.”

Faith didn’t give us all the answers. But it allowed us to live with unanswered questions. In particular, faith meant allowing God to be in control. We wanted to put God on our schedule, to answer our prayers by October 1. We quickly learned we had no choice but to trust God.

We also learned to see the larger picture. As 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 points out, God can use our disappointments and pain to help us better minister to others who are disappointed. As a result of what we went through, we now have greater opportunities and resources to comfort others.

In short, we have learned by God’s grace that failure need not be fatal. We are recovering, learning, and once again being used by God in ministry.

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson