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This is an angry column. I am enraged at sick and evil people in the church who destroy pastors. This column and magazine are typically read by clergy, so this is like "preaching to the choir." But I must say these things anyway, for they may add a bit of courage or clarity to the lives of troubled pastors, or at least assure them that they are not alone.

Some years ago I entitled one of these columns, "Let's Get the Pastor." In it I described a kind of game that goes on in many churches, with the pastor used as a football. This time I am describing the more vicious game in which a pastor is targeted for destruction, and a congregation is seriously damaged by the fallout. The perpetrators go free, of course, often to kill again, and often convinced that they are doing the right thing.

When I encounter such pastor killers, I am reminded of biblical passages where religious people destroy or terrorize their spiritual leaders. Even Jesus was not exempt. In one sense, we should not be surprised therefore, when we as clergy are terrorized, for it only took them three years to get Jesus. What hurts the most, of course, is that these people purport to be Christians. And often, they are persons in whom we have invested significant amounts of professional and personal time and energy.

My purpose in writing on this subject is to clarify for pastors and denominational executives, the fact of, the methods used by, and the remedy for clergy killers in the church.

THE REALITY OF CLERGY KILLERS

First, the fact of clergy killers. Nearly any experienced pastor and denominational executive has encountered these humanoids (excuse me, my anger is still showing!). We tend to deny, excuse, or pamper them in the church. But they are very real and very toxic. I have encountered them in every denomination, and in many congregations over the years. But because we believe such persons should not exist in the church, and that we should be kind and forgiving to everyone, we fail to admit or understand the tactics, and motivation, and devastating toll they take on the energy and resources of the church, besides the cruel damage they do to clergy and those dear to them.

Clergy killers typically have intimidating power because they are willing to violate the rules of decorum and caring the rest of us try to follow. This is powerful at a subconscious level, for we sense such persons are willing to escalate the fight, and use tactics we forbid to use ourselves. In fact, most of us clergy do not even know how to do survival fighting ("street fights"), much less have the necessary resources and networks for such showdowns.

Clergy killers are masters of disguise. They can present themselves as pious, active church members who are "only doing this for the good of the church." Naive and gentle ("peace at all costs") parishioners may be deceived by such camouflage. And they typically advocate for the CKs (Clergy Killers) by urging the pastor and church board to be patient, make allowances, or not to misjudge such folks. CKs can convince many that they are raising legitimate issues. And for those who might do battle with them, CKs use bluster, threats, and even terrorism to appear as unstoppable giants. CKs even have allies of opportunity, i.e., parishioners who do not advocate the cause CKs are espousing, but who wish to punish the pastor for their own hidden reasons.

Clergy killers are evil. There, I said it! There are clinical names, of course, but in our theological categories, they are evil. This means they are not just sinners, in the normal inadvertent or mistaken sense. They do evil intentionally, and willingly pursue its destructive means and ends. Even repentance and restraint on their part is suspect, for it is typically a tactic only. Being around and having to associate with such persons tempts healthy spiritual leaders to pronounce curses ("Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees..."), as someone we all know did more than once while on this earth.

IDENTIFYING CLERGY KILLERS AND THEIR EFFECTS

From a clinical (psychological) perspective, CKs are likely to have personality disorders (paranoid, antisocial, borderline, histrionic, narcissistic, and even passive aggressive). Or they may be previous or present victims of abuse. They may have volatile or addictive personalities. They may have inadequate socialization, arrested adolescence, and violent role models in their history. And they may have developed a perverse voyeuristic and vindictive taste for the suffering of their targeted victims.

In more ordinary terminology, CKs have learned the power of throwing tantrums to get their way. They know how to be bullies. They know how to distract, confuse, and seduce. And they have little sensitivity to the suffering of those outside their circle of cohorts.

It took me some time to realize the dimensions and variations of CKs' tactics. In generic terms, they can either wound or kill by direct attacks, by getting others to do their dirty work for them, or by inducing their victims to self-destruct. The first two are self-explanatory. But it is this third generic form of victimization that may go undetected.

The tactic of inducing a victim to self-destruct is not uncommon. Some jungle creatures do this. And it is not uncommon in business, politics, and the professions to harass a person in subtle and obvious ways until their stress produces irrational and destructive behavior. They may wound or destroy themselves, they may destroy a scapegoat, or they may do something bizarre, unethical, or criminal so that legal authorities must punish them. And it is not uncommon for the victim of a CK to develop behavior and attitudes that lead to alienation of family and friends, divorce, and loss of clergy credentials.

I could cite many examples of clergy killers in action. One that raises my ire every time I hear or remember his name is a former pastor who was once a shining star of his

denomination. He seemed to have everything going for him, until he became pastor of a medium- sized thriving and progressive church. But a couple of university professors and a seminary professor resented this pastors' charisma and success. they combined to sabotage his leadership. Then when his confidence began to falter, and his pastoral competence wained under their attacks, they began to accuse him of mental disorders. His wife divorced him in panic. He finally left ordained ministry, and has been unable to hold any but menial jobs. He now subsists in an inner city, hardly able to cope or even recognize old friends. The CKs continue in that church, like scorpions doing what scorpions have to do.

Cardiovascular disorders, cancer, arthritis, gastrointestinal disorders, respiratory problems used to be rather rare among clergy. And clergy used to generate the best mental health and longevity statistics of any profession. Not anymore. I hear of and work with highly stressed, paranoid, cynical, and dysfunctional clergy all the time now, with numbers growing. And many of these maladies are traceable to CKs and their effects. The costs to the church are enormous, in lost clergy, health costs, divided congregations, loss of ministry resources, and in debilitated pastors unable to function at much more than a survival level. Can anyone stop these CKs?

THE EXTENDED DAMAGE

One of the causes of the downturn in mainline Protestant denominations is the wounded pastor syndrome. When a pastor is bleeding and desperately trying to survive, it is apparent that she or he will have little energy available for the creative pastoring church growth requires. But since the pastor is still visible and the traditional services continue, most people will not realize what is occurring. This condition resembles a pet dog with worms. It still looks like a dog, so no one thinks to question the loss of energy, and the debilitation of mission. And hardly anyone goes to the pastor with the kind of understanding, strength, and support she or he needs.

I sat at lunch with pastors recently, at a conference I was leading on another topic. It was notable that they talked almost continually of church situations where the pastor was under attack. Their comments ranged from "there, but for the grace of God, go I"; "poor guy, I wish I could help him!"

More than one denominational executive has told me lately that as they travel across their district or the nation, they find attacks on clergy to be endemic. And they indicate a helplessness to do much about it. For even in strong executive denominations, top leaders have little authority to disarm or fight CKs. They fear offending powerful lay leaders, no matter how evil they are. Being politic, they realize that their power is derivative. And most denominational executives do not have the inclination toward the power tactics needed to eliminate CKs from a congregation. The current prevalence of lawsuits is certainly no encouragement for any denominational leader to risk offending hostile-aggressive persons. But legal means may be one possibility for controlling CKs.

It would be helpful if seminaries could prepare pastors for the real jungle of the local church. Academe is not notable for realism, however. It should be obvious by now that pastors need survival training. And they certainly should be trained in conflict management. Lip service to this need is not adequate. Recently I consulted with an organization that is establishing a leadership training process outside of seminaries. This organization purports to train pastors in evangelism, church growth, and "community based pastoring." When I asked the director what kind of training they offered pastors in building their own support base, and in survival tactics, he looked at me as if I were from another planet. He said, "If a pastor is a dynamic leader, there will be no such problems." If he hadn't been so sure of his institute's success, I could have told him of a burned-out pastor I had talked to the previous week, who had graduated from his program, and of at least two other graduates whom I had heard were under attack by CKs.

THE CONTEXT

The etiology of the CK phenomenon is not mysterious, for we have always had a few evil people in the church. But contemporary society is especially compatible for CKs. There is a general distrust of authority figures of any kind. There is biblical and theological illiteracy in the pews. This means parishioners do not understand God's purposes, and the dynamics of spiritual leadership. There is a general sense of entitlement growing in the church, in which church members feel entitled to comfort and privilege. And if a pastor does not please them, they are free to criticize and punish. There is a growing business mentality in the church, which says that if the CEO (pastor) does not produce, he should be fired. There is mobility among parishioners. This means they feel little loyalty to the "peace and unity of the church." For they will soon move on, without having to deal with the consequences of their irresponsible behavior. And, as has been mentioned, we are not training pastors to handle conflict, nor support themselves in survival situations.

All churches and pastors are not suffering, of course. And all critics of pastoral leadership are not CKs. But the killing of pastors is a serious, and in my experience, a growing phenomenon. Some pastors are incompetent, and some "shoot themselves in the foot," but none of them deserves the torturing tactics of CKs.

It is not only the victimized pastor who suffers, of course. We have noted the subtle, but significant damage to congregations and denominations. And we should certainly note the damage to clergy spouses, families, and intimate friends when CKs attack. Such victims may have even fewer survival resources, unless they have their own careers and support networks.

Identifying a problem is useful. But offering possible solutions and preventions techniques is also necessary. Even though clergy killing is such a distasteful, and denied subject, some healing insights will be useful... at least to clergy who know the reality of this treacherous role vulnerability.

GENERIC CASE MODEL

The first overt sign of the killing process began at a Church Board meeting (Session, Board of Deacons, Classis, Vestry, etc.). A member said, "A lot of people are complaining to me about the pastor. They're saying he doesn't call enough; he can't be reached when they want to talk to him; and he's not friendly enough." The Board asked who these people are, but the complainant refused to say. Then they asked for specific examples. He refused to be specific. The Board said they couldn't take action unless they knew the specific complaints. The complainant replied that they better take action, because these were important members who might leave the church.

The Board set up an investigative team, which reported at the next meeting that they could find no tangible evidence. The complainant told them that the complaints were real, and that they might have something to do with sexual misconduct and misuse of church funds.

The investigative team again reported no tangible evidence. The complainant then called for a congregational meeting. This request was denied.

Before the next board meeting, a letter filled with innuendoes against the pastor was mailed to the congregation. At the following meeting, the Board and pastors were in a near panic. The complainant said he had talked to the bishop, and the bishop said these were serious charges that needed to be investigated.

A new investigative team reported next time that there seemed to be a lot of people unhappy with the pastor. The Board voted to have a delegation meet with the pastor.

At the next meeting the pastor was absent. After six months of this harassment, he was in the hospital. The Board voted to send a delegation to the bishop. And at the following meeting, the delegation reported that the bishop recommended removal of the pastor.

The pastor is scheduled for heart bypass surgery now. And rumor says his wife is addicted to tranquilizers.

THE REMEDIES

The first remedial insight is one to which this column is dedicated, namely, the existence of clergy killers. Such persons exist and continue their devastation in that shadowy dimension of institutional religion, behind the prominence of altar, pulpit, and pew. As I consult with victimized clergy, and even savvy denominational executives, it is hard for them to admit the presence and damage of clergy killers. It is much easier to blame pastors, for an unwritten expectation of our profession is that successful pastors should not have unhappy parishioners. There are incompetent pastors, of course, but there are clergy killers also.

The second insight is that the motivations and tactics of CKs are of a different order of magnitude than ordinary critics or nagging detractors. They are evil. And this is what makes them difficult to deal with. For though religion and clergy are not strangers to evil,

we have forgotten the need for exorcism. Given this lapse, we simply must teach ourselves reality. CKs do not stop with winning a single victory over a pastor. It is only a matter of time before another attack is fomented. CKs do not stop when thwarted. They may back off, but this is only to regroup and find a winning strategy. CKs camouflage their methods and goals through denial, piousness, distractions, seduction, and unlikely alliances. CKs are willing to go to any length to achieve their goals, and seem to relish the notoriety and general destruction they generate. Theirs is a lifelong goal. When they kill off (get rid of) one pastor, they will certainly wait for an opportunity to kill the next one, even if they had a part in bringing her or him to their pulpit. And, CKs typically do not leave a congregation after either a victory or defeat, as other types of clergy antagonists often do. They tend to stay and turn a parish into a clergy killing field.

The third insight about CKs is how difficult and rare it is to find successful ways of thwarting or eliminating them on a permanent basis. As already mentioned, the denial process in the church is so strong that neither traditional theology nor polity offer effective relief. But there are several strategies that offer some possibility of success.

1. Patience. If one learns survival tactics, outliving CKs may be possible. For forty years in the wilderness eliminates some of them.
2. Raising consciousness. Educating laity and clergy to the CK phenomenon is valuable for both the short term and long term. This is sophisticated education, however. For denial and CK vengeance will try to sabotage it.
3. Teach survival. Clergy and their intimates must be provided with self-preservation skills, since few lay leaders, colleagues, or denominational executives will come to their aid, ready to stay the course with tenacious CKs.
4. Give theology and polity some teeth, in order that when CKs are identified, they may be eliminated. We have now put teeth into eliminating killer clergy (sexual malfeasors); we could do the same with clergy killers.
5. Engage knowledgeable consultants to bring in outside skills needed in this struggle for which the church is poorly prepared. Such professionals can advise and devise the interventions necessary. I have been encouraging experienced Pastoral Counselors (AAPC certified) to bring their special skills to the church for such ministries.
6. "Go by the book." Follow your denomination's polity and protocol as closely as possible. This not only lessens legal liability, it also sets precedence, and gives all involved parties an honorable method and goal.
7. All of the above!

This is a negative column, in that it deals with an unwanted subject and with admitted anger. I pray, however, that its effect will be positive, on behalf of embattled clergy and God's church.