

# WHY PASTORS GET ...



By Al Ells, M.C

Patrick was surprised his church's Board of Directors wanted to meet without him. Fearful, he asked “Why?” and was told that they had something confidential to discuss among themselves.

The past four months had been difficult, with Patrick experiencing increased pressure and demand for change from the Board. He had reacted in anger and protest, which seemed only to make matters worse. He was even more shocked when they called him at home late that night and told him they wanted his resignation.

His tortured thoughts kept him up all night wondering, “How did this happen?”

It’s puzzling to many pastors how they can be let go by a Board of Elders or Directors when their church is in good shape and the congregation lovingly supports them. *Christianity Today* surveyed a large number of pastors and found that 23 percent reported having been fired or forced to resign in the past for reasons other than moral failure. Additionally, 45 percent of ousted pastors later thought they could have done more to avoid being forced out.

So why do pastors get fired, especially when there is no moral failure and the congregation seems reasonably content with the pulpit ministry? The answer lies mainly in the quality of the pastor’s relationships with others.

Leading a church is a very complicated undertaking. Jim Collins, author of the best-selling book *Good to Great*, says that running a church is more difficult than leading a business. A church leader must be able to connect with and motivate many different constituencies from community leaders to staff members, congregants and Board members. The many conflicting pressures of all these groups makes leadership more complex and success dependent on more than one factor. Often a pastor mistakenly thinks his only true constituent is the congregation. If they are content with his preaching and teaching, the assumption is that his job is secure. However, that is not true.

This is where Patrick made his mistake. He was a good preacher but mismanaged his relationships with both staff and Board members. He was often brusque with staff and perfectionistic and critical of their performance. His mantra was always “Let’s do everything with excellence.” Although it was a worthwhile goal, mistakes and less than perfect efforts by his team were abundantly criticized and never tolerated.

Defensive with Board members, he rarely admitted to wrong-doing and frequently argued back on minor points. He always seem to know better than anyone else. The result? He had difficulty positively influencing either group on a personal level and frequently caused others to feel put down. His only saving virtue was that the congregation liked his preaching.

The foundation of all effective leadership is relationship. As long as people like and respect the leader, he’ll be secure in his position. Likeability and relational management are both keys to success. A pastor with poor relationship skills or low personal likeability will have difficulty garnering and maintaining the support he or she needs to effectively lead others. This is why many leadership evaluators administer the *Clifton StrengthFinder* or the *DISC* test. They are looking for what the meta-church model calls “charismatic” people who easily attract and lead others.

Pastors usually spend many hours working on sermons and teachings intent on connecting with their audiences and motivating them through insight and emotion. They become experts on public relational management. However, they often neglect intentionally connecting with, motivating and influencing their staff or Board. They can be deficient in personal and small-group relational management.

Another facet of relational management relates to how a leader resolves conflict. Studies indicate that conflict is endemic to the pastorate. For example, the Fuller Institute of Church Growth reports that 40 percent of surveyed pastors say they have a serious conflict with a staff member, volunteer or parishioner at least once a month. Most are not trained to effectively resolve conflict, thereby often resorting to avoidance or attack. Unresolved conflict easily leads to offense and hard feelings by congregants, staff and Board members, resulting in a discordant leadership culture in which the pastor is not on the same page as his conflicting party.

So why do pastors get fired? Practically speaking, it is because the pastor has alienated the Board of Directors directly or has alienated the staff and the Board has now become involved. Patrick alienated both his staff and ultimately, his Board. His difficulty with the staff leaked through to select Board members who then challenged him to change some of his leadership practices. Patrick argued and blamed staff members for being insubordinate by going around him to the Board. While certainly a wrong practice, the staff members felt they had no recourse. Instead of seeing their triangulation as a symptom of something wrong he felt it was a direct challenge to his authority and he

struck back. The ensuing polarization between Patrick and both the Board and staff was unsustainable and so they fired him.

The conflict could have been resolved if Patrick had realized the leadership's imperative to always be on the same page. When his agenda became different than theirs, he is vulnerable. Leadership is influence not formal authority. Patrick would have been better advised to work with his Board chairperson in analyzing the situation and seeing what remedy could produce a win-win for all parties involved. Instead, he reacted, offended the Board and caused his own demise.

## Thoughts for the Future

### Immediately Address Issues

If a breach is starting between the pastor and his staff or Board, do not ignore it. Letting it develop further only polarizes people's mindsets and cements their oppositional views. Studies indicate that early intervention is critical. Patrick and the Board waited too long to sit down and try and work out a solution. Instead they sent emails back and forth over the course of months hoping the dissension would go away over time.

### Get Help

Find a mediator who can help both sides. Often a fellow pastor or respected counselor can help everyone "take the beam out of their own eye" before trying to take the "speck out of the other person's eye." Patrick resisted any help, thinking the Board was wrong and would see the error of their ways. Another unhealthy pattern is seeking a listening ear wherever possible hoping someone will ally with you and tell you what you want to hear. (See last month's article titled "In Crisis or Conflict; don't look for Allies!")

### Embrace Humility and Let Go

This is always the best answer when faced with conflict. Even with wayward Boards or difficult staff conflicts, going to war is seldom advisable. The only person that wins is the enemy of our souls. A good friend of mine recently came to this conclusion. Locked in a battle with his Board and a few staff members, he chose not to fight. He graciously and humbly resigned rather than insisting on his rights. The church was spared a war and the Lord was gracious to him. It took a lot of courage and humility to do so when he knew it was not all his fault.