



Have You Heard of Mobbing?

Leadership storms come from many directions and sometimes all at once. Knowing the etiology can make a difference in both dealing with and preventing them. For Pastors and other ministry leaders, there is one conflict area that seems to consistently cause painful storms. This common form of adversity in leadership is known as “mobbing.” It’s a sociological term not frequently used, and only recently applied to ministry. However, the dynamic it describes is well known, especially in church circles. Here is the definition that pioneer researcher H. Leymann coined in 1990. (Mobbing and psychological terror at workplaces, *Violence & Victims*, p. 120)

Mobbing: hostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons, mainly toward one individual.

Mobbing usually originates from a few disgruntled people who are convinced the leader is wrong and they are right. For example, a handful of congregants personally attacked Michael, the pastor of a mid-west church. They slandered him to others (woman hater), when he added a contemporary Sunday morning service that required changing the meeting time for Women’s Bible Study. They spread rumors and innuendo about his performance, also claiming he was changing things that didn’t need to be changed. This type of virulent, targeted gossip demonstrates a common form of mobbing. As is typical in mobbing, they met secretly and built their case against Michael, gathering allies, yet never facing him directly to resolve their complaint. They stirred up and led dissension. The vast majority of the church members were

happy with where the church was going and with the new Sunday service. But these few dissenters were not pleased with the changes he was making, hence the attack.

This same dynamic forced Len to resign from his church after his trusted Executive Pastor joined a Board member in a campaign of accusations and exaggerations against him. They claimed he was on an ego tip and had lost sight of the vision of the church. The Board member secretly speculated to others that Len “may be homosexual.” The attacks so wounded him, his wife and children, that he felt compelled to resign and move on instead of fighting back.

Mobbing by a small group of focused dissenters can be effective at targeting and removing a leader. Researcher John LaRue found that the hostile group that forces a pastor out of the church is typically only seven to ten people, or just 3% to 4% of the congregation (*Forced Exits; High-Risk Church*).

Responses to Consider

It is very difficult to deal with individuals who are mobbing you. Often, it’s like the childhood story of Behr Rabbit and the tar baby – the more Behr Rabbit punched the tar baby the more he got stuck in the tar. A wiser course may be to not respond directly to the “mobbers,” but instead have your Board and an outside trusted consultant intervene. The consultant can be an experienced and trusted pastor or even a specialist in conflict resolution. Typically, the consultant will interview all the parties involved, to assure the disgruntled members are heard and their complaints appropriately channeled. Additionally, he or she will synthesize the key issues and make recommendations. Taking these actions may help to diffuse the dissent and possibly resolve the conflict. Alternatively, it can be the impetus for the “mobbers” to decrease the attack and leave the church, instead of driving the pastor out.