

Trauma, God Image and Renewal of Terminated Pastors

ABSTRACT

This study is based on an analysis of the narratives of pastors who have previously experienced high levels of distressing conflict in pastoral leadership of Australian Baptist or Churches of Christ churches. All of these had chosen to leave or were ejected from their pastorates as a direct result of the ongoing conflict. Through a close analysis of their narratives which were shared during a number of semi-structured interviews, some prominent themes emerged lending themselves to analysis and the refinement of theory. A model of pastoral response to conflict emerged. The pastors can be grouped into three categories of response to the conflict. This was not determined by whether they returned to ministry or 'abandoned their call'. All persons maintain an abiding sense of call to ministry. The issues that discriminate between them reflect also whether they have been able to move on from the distress of conflict that centred upon themselves. A Model of pastoral response is proposed that integrates three variables that determine this emotional outcome: the pastors' preferred God Images, their underlying theological worldview, and their natural response to anxiety. There is also some evidence that this natural response to anxiety and their preferred God images relate directly to the adequacy of their parental images and their primal holding environment. Typical denominational responses to such persons appears to be inadequate and a significant complication in the process of post-traumatic healing. The proposed model would therefore suggest effectively care for such pastors necessitates a backwards reading of these pastoral narratives as a source of exploration and reconstruction for those concerned and the pastors themselves.

Introduction

This study is a summary of intensive qualitative research performed a few years ago involving persons who had been pastors from Baptist or Churches of Christ congregations within three states in Australia. The purpose of the investigation was to engage in grounded research whereby their recollections of their experiences were used as a fulcrum to launch a theory of pastoral reactions after significant church based conflict. This involved an interplay between theological frameworks and a few psycho-dynamic lenses leading to a proposal for a course of pastoral care of such pastors. The specific ground of this research was to

ascertain the impact of high-level conflict upon a pastor's sense of identity, and whether this produced a reappraisal by them of their sense of being called into church leadership as their ministry. Although conducted intensively by in-depth interviews the results provided by the rich data included some surprising and counter-intuitive outcomes when read using the interplay of categories from a Bowen 'family systems theory' lens and the notion of 'Helpful/un-helpful God Images' emerging from pastoral theology and 'object relations theory'. The theory that emerged could have significant implications for those who care for such persons, denominational interventionists and especially those preparing persons for the pastoral vocation.

Dimensions of the Study

Twelve pastors eventually volunteered their time for interview. Initially, it was not uncommon for a degree of reserve to be expressed by those participants who did not already know me, and a couple expressed suspicion that I might in fact be 'a front for the denomination'. This is a sign of the persisting feelings of disapproval for their perceived treatment by the denomination at their hour of need.

The characteristics of these persons included that they were ordained pastors who had been through a typical denominational training and accreditation process and yet had been involved in a church situation where conflict had become so intense that they had either had their pastorate terminated, or had chosen to resign. Of the twelve¹ who volunteered, seven left ministry while five continued. One of these, Randal Lane has recently retired prematurely due to ongoing stresses associated with the role. As is evident from the exchanges below, some of these persons heal, or perhaps mature through the conflictual experience whereas others bear marks of longer-term trauma and a lack of resolution. The incidence of healing or trauma did not coincide with the decision to return or abandon pastoral ministry.

The churches sampled were quite varied regarding demographics and the espoused spirituality. All these churches shared the common ecclesial structure of a congregationally governed church with the pastor co-labouring ostensibly with a group of 'lay' co-leaders as the 'first

¹ There were certainly more than twelve pastors in these denominations who fitted the required categories. But only twelve were willing to endure the process of an interview.

amongst equals'. The related narratives of these pastors suggested that this ideal was rarely the reality experienced by the church or pastor.

Pastors were interviewed at least once in an in-depth interview that was to take in the order of 50 minutes. All participants without exception responded well over the allotted time so that the average was close to 70 minutes. Some were followed up at the stage of transcription to clarify details. Usually pastors flowed with further narratives of stress and conflict at those times.

Dramatis Personae

The following names are pseudonymous but are provided to personalize the readings.

Name	Location	Church Type: Age, Size and Theology	Period of Appointment	Perceived Reason for Disruption by (Ex) Pastor
Gregory Trehuen	Older Suburban	Small Established 50 Members Liberal	Jan - Oct. 1995	Theological Incompatibility with Elders, Church boundaries and Ethical Stances.
Lex Verney	Regional City	Established Middle Size 100 Members. Conservative.	Jan - Sep. 1993	Caught between polarized factions over issues of worship style and attention given.
Ron Shearer	Historic Rural Township	Established Small Church < 50 members Fundamentalist.	1989 - 93	Triangulation in family conflicts. Divergent views of mission priorities. Inappropriate Leadership style.
Louise Bardon	Inner City	Small Aging Established Conservative	1990 - 92	Change in Styles of Leadership and Worship. Role of woman as Pastor.
Ryan Mailey	Growing Suburbs	Established Large Church 300 members, Charismatic- Conservative Evangelical Mixture	1991 - May 1995	Serious conflict with assistant Pastor and his followers in Leadership. Charismatic pressure group resurfaces

Daniel Hutton	New Rural Township	Newer Middle Size Church 100 members, Charismatic.	January 1995 - December 1995	Conflict with Strong Power Brokers over style and vision.
Henry Kenmore	Growing Suburban	Growing Large Church >300 members, Evangelical.	Early 1989 - March 1997	Leadership style change required by key leaders to appease disgruntled interest groups.
Dale Chester	High Welfare/ Wk-Class Bayside Area	Smaller Established Church, 50 members. Evangelical.	Feb. 1989 - June 1996.	A new group in leadership resents the changes in worship style and ministry focus.
Barry Lawrence	Isolated Country	Small Church in Growth boom. 20- 80 members.	1986 -87.	Small leadership team fears and opposes the int. of new worship style.
Randall Lane	Growing Outer Suburban Area	Large Evangelical Established Church 300 Members Mixed Evangelical/ Charismatic.	1990 - July 1997.	Clash with support base of ambitious Yth Past. over extent of charismatic influence in worship.
Graeme McLeish	Industrial City	Recently Planted Church, 50 Members. Conservative. Evangelical	February 1987 - March 1993.	Conflict with New Power brokers over influx of 'unsuitable' new converts. Issues of personal style and mission priorities.
Ken Archer	Rural Township	Small Established Church 50 members Conservative	Jan.1986 - May 1987	Difference with key 'lay leaders' over Mission priorities, Ecumenism and exit of wealthy supporters.

At the Narrative Surface: Themes and Distinctions

All pastors shared the common personal experience of significant traumatising conflict that centred upon them and involved a disapproving opposition orchestrated by strong and usually long-term

members of some standing in the church. This traumatic period induced the sorts of circumstances that either resulted in the pastor taking the initiative to terminate their own tenure, or, matters were taken out of their hands and political processes of the church were activated with the result that the pastor was removed from their pastorate by vote. The participants and their narratives were able to be compared according to whether the pastors chose some degree of control by choosing to exit or lost control in the context of conflict. Pastors' responses were also compared according to whether they chose to leave ministry altogether or return to the pastorate in some other context.

Counter Intuitive Recollections

Three features of the shared narratives were startling to myself initially as interviewer. Firstly, the stories involved tales of severe traumatising clashes between pastors and uncompromising figures within the churches with a significant determination to cross all but the most physically violent boundaries of common decency to evict the pastors. Dishonesty, distortions, backroom politicking, election rigging, libellous allegations and threats were common-place in these 'free-church community' narratives. So bitter were the conflicts that many of the pastors had difficulty even beginning to verbalise their stories to myself and those that did often told of stresses and significant persistent physical symptoms that had continued to bedevil them even ten years since the traumatic period. Pastoral and family grief then followed the exit from friends in the churches, homes and friendship networks. According to conflict consultant Speed Leas,² these conflicts reached such levels where systemic anxieties within the church were too high³ for the churches themselves to be able to resolve these among themselves.

² Speed Leas *Moving Your Church Through Conflict*, New York, Alban Institute, 1986. Leas model does not presume that conflict moves linearly through stages or phases from minor disruptions to outright violence but can leap from one low levels skipping intermediate phases and become high level conflict without warning. This has to do with the level of fighting that a protagonist finds 'comfortable' within their biological family.

³These 'levels' are a composite of three variables which are both distinct and clearly observable in the behaviours of parties to conflict. These include the precision or articulation versus the emotionality of the language used by opponents, the rigidity of group boundaries formed by the coalitions that may form during the conflict and, the degree to which the intention of a conflicted party reflects a spirit of goodwill as opposed to vindictiveness toward the opponent. Leas level 4 or 5 where the coalitions are firm and relationships produce a degree of toxicity within the system.

People within such systems cannot detach from the conflict despite its emotional 'toxicity'.

A second remarkable feature was that despite the varied contexts and lengths of pastorates, there was a quite limited range of 'plot features' that emerged in the narratives and some surprising omissions. The contexts and precipitating history varied greatly from church to church, but one had the impression when reading the plot lines that the characters and their 'moves' had been transferred across from one church to the next to continue the conflict in a new context. Space does not permit the exposition of the features, but of the twelve factors all pastor's stories shared seven and most commonly nine of these features.⁴ None of these had anything to do with a charge of pastoral incompetence. If anything it is their competence that makes them a more difficult 'target' of their proponents who have to explore more aggressive measures to exert significant pressure upon them.

Thirdly, there is little difference between the conflict levels experienced, in terms of the scope or the variety of strategic politics faced by the individual pastor who resigned as opposed to the one who endured through the painful process of termination. The most significant result was that those who left ministry altogether actually experienced *fewer* of the behavioural indicators of conflict in an absolute sense and, their accounts of the incidents showed that their conflict experiences never quite reached the destructive levels experienced by those who chose to express their sense of call elsewhere.

These narratives suggest that if we are to understand the nature of the impact of conflict upon a pastor's response to conflict and their reconstruction post termination one has to look at factors more intrinsic to the individual pastor, their intra-psychological issues and the nature of the inter-psychological forces beneath the surface of the church culture rather than rational-surface level explanations.

Beneath the Narrative Surface

As we step away from a content analysis to an analysis of the emotionality and thought processes of the pastors themselves, it was

⁴ The most common of these included the pastor taking a role within prior unresolved conflict, disapproval concerning the wife's role or chosen vocation, a misinterpretation of the terms of the call, differences over a perceived change to the style of worship, a perceived broadening of the missional priorities of the Gospel etc. These descriptions and data can be supplied to interested parties.

apparent that there were three distinct groups within the sample. These groupings relate not so much to the outcomes; whether or not a person returns to ministry, but whether or not a person is able to emotionally heal and move beyond the trauma of conflict related termination. In fact it is possible for a person to be motivated to re-enter ministry precisely because they were still enmeshed with persons in the original site of conflict. The response of some was to become more closely attached to the denominational structures and advisory boards, keen to prove themselves as pastors by 'throwing their hat into the ring' for another opportunity of call to a new church.

It is clear though that re-entry into ministry by no means implied that they have been able to move beyond the conflict let alone become more solid selves through the experience. Others remaining within ministry showed little evidence of the capacity to reflectively interpret the experience let alone interpret this period through the eyes of faith. It became apparent that there were three corresponding means by which these pastors coped with the pains and losses associated with their traumatic terminations. These persons can be categorized by their reactivity within the trauma and where they displace their pain and anger over their dismissal.

These persons may be distinguished according to:

- (ii) The role or level of responsibility they naturally adopted at the height of the conflict.
- (iii) Their evident emotional connection with key figures in the conflict, the opponents whose efforts led to their demise
- (iv) The way that they consciously articulated their image of God and the nature of the relationship that they perceive they had with the God during as the conflict reached unmanageable proportions and
- (v) The primary symptoms exhibited in the present when recollecting and attempting to make sense of the traumatic period

Unhelpful Postures and Responses

Edwin Friedman and other 'disciples' of the Bowen Family Systems Theory⁵ specify that a mark of the emotionally mature is the capacity to

⁵ Edwin Friedman *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, New York, Guilford, 1985, Ronald Richardson *Creating a Healthier Church: Family*

recognize the limits of one's responsibility for another person's emotional state within a family or emotionally connected group. The less differentiated tend to find themselves over-functioning for the group. They blame themselves for the anger and anxiety of powerful 'system parents'.

There were two groups that were particularly traumatized by conflict. These are termed the Non Reflective Externalizer (NRE) and the Overfunctioning Internalizer (OI) group. These are contrasted with those whom I term the 'Reflective Realist' (RR) who have emerged 'stronger' for the experience.

The Overfunctioning Internalizer

The OI underestimates the capacity of the congregation to handle the responsibility of resolving conflict publicly. Thus they seek to take the brunt of the attack upon themselves rather than utilize the political processes of the church to resolve their differences openly and ethically.

Greg Trethuen's tale of conflict centred around a lack of support from his eldership concerning a church discipline matter that clearly required direct confrontation. In response Greg has relinquished his natural leadership style absolutely if an opportunity for ministry arose again.

I've had to change a lot. Circumstances affect my thinking a fair bit. I'm a lot more realistic when I used to be idealistic. I'd have certain expectations and standards but those people I worked with have different standards. I've learnt to be less insistent that other people accept my standards. But previously I was unconsciously assuming, or at least projecting a way of operating that they would have to accept my viewpoints. I needed to just learn that if people won't accept these principles then I have to have less expectations.

His anxiety here demonstrates a mode of pastoring that is virtually an abandonment of leadership when faced by opposition. This sense of having a lack of options when confronted with opposition is typical. Another pastor Ron Shearer recalled this sense of being 'stuck' with

Systems Theory, Leadership and Congregational Life, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1996,
 Peter Steinke *How Your Church Family System Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*, New York, Alban Institute, 1993

impossible options. He found himself in a situation where his pastoral and his family's personal boundaries were continually transgressed. In the context of recollecting a time he called for help from a denominational representative he revealed:

I would have liked someone to tell some of these power brokers off. "Sack the lot of them!" Perhaps I'm too chicken to do so. But instead of me doing it myself, ... maybe I need to be more assertive there ... The problem could be within me ... perhaps the College could run an assertiveness course. ... So, perhaps if I was more assertive, more political, I could be more assertive and say "No, I've got God on my side. This is right, we're not just into conversions, we just throw the seed and let God win the people to Christ, so just sit down and shut up and lets get on with the job!"

"Did you want to say that?" I asked him.

"Oh I wanted to but I felt I couldn't. ... Because I'm a passive person in a meeting and I don't want to upset people. Then there's another problem too. I would say the wrong thing or it would come out wrong and then other people, ... They'll have a better come back to me. Perhaps I lose confidence in whatever I can debate a person like that in public and they'll have a better come back than me and I'd be stuck.

Such things reveal issues that could easily fall under the Family Systems heading of personal 'differentiation'. This is a less than satisfactory arrangement as these pastors even a decade after the events cannot mention these opponents without experiencing a degree of distressing emotions. Their general emotional mood is one of confusion or a lack of resolution and understanding of their experiences. Elapsed time does not bring clarity and they are generally fearful of further conflicts and therefore have withdrawn from a pastorate where this is likely to recur, or, if re-entering ministry through a new pastorate, they fear that the spectre of violent opposition may again return to attack them again without premeditation or justification. In general the OI imbibes the criticisms from their opponents to a large extent, and adjust their ministry persona to suit. Sometimes this resulted in over-functioning and taking on too many responsibilities to appease their critics. Generally these persons are the most likely to leave ministry, or, if they remain, to focus on more limited and manageable roles. If they still attend church, they tend to keep their distance from the denomination perhaps as a sign of a sense of being disapproved.

The Non-Reflective Externalizer

The (NRE) type, exhibited a different sort of over-functioning, often taking on too many physical roles to try to 'turn the ship around' or 'make the church work'. They had a deep sense of injustice because they had like the biblical Martha, poured themselves upon the 'altar' of ministry, even more so when being accused of various indiscretions by their opponents. Like the OI the NRE are enmeshed with figures years after the events that led to their termination. Seeking vindication they broaden the scope of their focus upon the denominational figures who in their minds' eyes were not forthcoming with enough support or defence against their foes, or have not assisted their re-entry into ministry with sufficient commitment. Unlike the OI the NRE often struggles to even begin to express their grief and bitterness even to the neutral researcher being 'jammed' emotionally with powerful emotions such as indignation, blame, and anger that has possessed them for years. Unlike the OI, they not see that there is any adjustment that they could have made or should now make to their ministry 'modus operandi'. Instead they appear fixated toward gaining vindication for themselves and consequently they become enmeshed with denominational officials, especially when these do not seem to be representing their case well before prospective new church vacancies.

Theologising on the Run

Remarkably, both the OI and NRE types exhibited a similar limited range of options when it came to theologising about the nature of God's role within the whole situation of conflict and termination. In recent times helpful theories have developed regarding the 'helpfulness' of the God image that persons have for reparation and a healthy emotional functioning.⁶ For instance a 'Needy God Image' can lead to over-functioning if the pastor thinks that God relies upon them to help fulfil God's purposes. A pastor with a 'Caretaker God image' expects God to intervene and eventually solve their difficulties in response to a reasonable life of faith. A 'God Image' of 'Tutor' would be found where

⁶ M E Cavanaugh "The Perception of God in Pastoral Counselling" *Pastoral Psychology* 41(1992) 75-80, M Sarot "Pastoral Counselling and the Compassionate God" *Pastoral Psychology* 44 (1995) 185-190, R Lamothe "Hatred Hostility and Faith: A Theological Perspective" *Pastoral Psychology* 44 (1996) 185-197, D J Louw "God as Friend: Metaphoric Theology in Pastoral Care" *Pastoral Psychology* 46(1998) 233-242

a pastor interpreted their sufferings as testing to bring personal growth. The difficulty with such an image is coming to terms with the inexplicable severity of the termination experience. Sarot suggested that classical theological images of God as either 'passible' versus an image of an 'uninvolved God' would each bring its own trauma. It is all a matter of degree. A God who never participates in suffering may be as ineffective as God who cannot detach and overbalances into the suffering of his subjects. Needless to say the difficulties faced by these pastors certainly reflect these sorts of images. Their complications do not stem from the fact that they abandon their God so much as their images do not sustain them in the chaos of conflict.

One significantly traumatised pastor who re-entered ministry still bears physical symptoms of trauma, tremors mixed with depressions. Henry Kenmore interpreted his suffering saying ...

... God needed to move me here [the new church]. He needed to move me out of there and he could see that it needed a volcano to get me and so he sent along a volcano. That's the only way I can rationalize it. I don't feel as though I have been destroyed as a man of faith and a pastor. I have been rocked. Yes. But not destroyed.

Ron Shearer shows sign of a Tutor image too but mixed with an impassible image

I felt like David against Goliath and even though I have got God on my side, uhm, we're kind of defeated and the power brokers are having their way! I know that He's the 'Crucified God' who identifies with the struggling, and these things aren't his fault ... the reality of evil, ... uhm. Yes, OK. I did question though that God knows what he's doing, that sort of theology. ... What he let happen he was not in full control of. Because 'I believe god is sovereign, he's in control. He wasn't' doing this suff deliberately, or, maybe he was! And maybe he was just doing this to me to make me more assertive or more political? I was very mixed up when I came out of ministry on this issue. Is God doing anything? And I suppose I still am ..."

Such circuitous thinking from these two groups of pastors generally presupposed that the meaning of this ministry episode should be obvious, not mysterious. Whatever Image these pastors operate with interpreting their experience, the nature of the relationship perceived between the pastoral self and the God Image for OI and NRE types was what one could term a 'conditional', or even a 'contractual' arrangement.

It is as if this assumption serves as an ‘operating system’ onto which their chosen theological content is ‘downloaded’. The cosmos for such persons was thought to be a self-evidently clear, linear, mechanism for the dispensation of justice. There is little sense of a ‘not yet’ eschatology where wrongs now have to wait by faith to be righted a later aeon. These pastors had a sense of entitlement or a science of natural justice, whereby, if they had functioned faithfully, or ‘over-functioned’ above and beyond the call of duty, then they surely had every right to expect that God would vindicate them after a limited ‘saga’ of conflict and even bless them. At least he would remove their foes from their positions of influence. When this does not occur the OI are left confused, bewildered with a disturbing shadow cast over the image of God. Yet, the NRE are just as ‘committed to ministry’ if not more so than before their ‘termination’.⁷

Alternatively this double bind of dependency upon and accountability to the God Image, explain both the passivity and resignations of some pastors; the OI group, and also the fixated determination of the NRE group. Such matters are a serious signal that critical pastoral debriefing is needed lest these persons continue in ministry with the potential for anger to be vented in inappropriate situations in the future.

Furthermore, the long-term pastoral depression and anger turned inward could explain the significant physiological disturbances that followed these persons out of ministry or into their next pastorate. Some OI developed symptoms after the onset of proceedings to terminate them that included a depressed affect, sleep and digestive disorders, migraines and one even suffered from a brain tumour. Greg Trethuen

⁷ One also senses from the occasional oblique remark that their ‘non-reflectiveness’ masks a new despising of God akin to Neiburhr’s concept of the ‘evil imagination’. ⁷ La Mothe suggests that where irrational levels of anxiety results in significant hostility, transference of primal experiences of powerlessness and absolute dependence may be occurring. If this psychological route is taken along with a tendency to absolutize one’s images of God uncritically, then this God Representation may be met with significant unconscious distrust and hostility. This emotionality triggers significant anxiety in a paradoxical bind. “If my images of God die, I die too!” Such hostility from the faithful servant cannot be overtly projected against the Superior Being who has been a significant sustaining object in the holding environment of the individual. This discomfiting anxiety may be dealt with in two ways: displacement of anger toward other bi-standers so as to maintain a secure self, or, a mechanical parody of loyalty that masks a brooding distrust, passivity, or outright hostility toward God.

describe the whole period when his church leadership rejected him as “like carrying around one large big black ball of pain that was with [me] all the time”.

The Ever-Present Family of Origin

Such evidence of major personal distress could logically stem from a deep sense of abandonment reinforced by the banishment from one's 'spiritual family' without just cause. Such an inner contest reflects dynamics transferred from experiences entrenched from the family of origin. Sometimes in the course of the interviews the pastors themselves would make these connections, obviously for the first time as they 'heard themselves think'. Henry Kenmore for instance, despite the unjust treatment he received from the determined few, refused to take the option of having the charges laid against him aired in a public church meeting. Henry took on board too much in presuming that he was responsible for making these powerful figures and presumes that the church is not competent to resolve its conflicts in open dialogue. I asked him why, given the fact that he knew he had strong and loving support in the church, he did not allow the church meeting to judge the charges of his opponents had decided it was time for him to leave. He responded by saying ...

Right, I had that choice, didn't I? But I thought to have a meeting like that would be pitting people against each other over me. And as I chatted to a few people in denominational leadership, they thought it was best not to get people entrenched against each other over me. They said it would not help my cause, because I could go on from a meeting like that, even if I had ninety nine percent approval from the people. But you'd still know that those against you would be even more angry now; even more angry, because you had sort of, stood up to them because they were against you. And so the most loving thing to do would be to just leave.

He chose resignation as the best way to “keep the peace”. Henry speaks and behaves as if he is not a full member of the church family or that the rights and privileges of all members somehow do not apply to him. He shares with many of the intervening denominational officials a simplistic premise that conflicts are just a matter of 'differences of opinion', 'personality clashes' and the like. He negated the historical church data that included significant deceit, conspiracy and unreasonable

demands that would have scandalized a rational tribunal had he only felt the right to own and to air his grievances.

At one stage I woke up a couple of weeks back and turned to my wife and said “I know what I’m going to do to get this monkey off my back once for all. I think I will write a letter to the church apologizing … apologizing for the hurt I’ve caused the church. And she said “You! Apologize to the Church?!” Would you please tell your counsellor what you have just said to me?”

In later counselling he made the connection between this over-functioning and his role within his family of origin which was characterised by aggressive conflict between both his parents. The counsellor responded in Henry’s words …

“Thank you for giving me an insight into your past. Have you always taken the blame for things? And I said “Yes I think I have”. “I’ve always taken the blame for things in order to mend relationships and to er, make other people feel good.”

As Henry recounted this, a cathartic moment opened up as Henry made a significant connection between present unconscious actions and roles played within his family of origin.

That’s right. Peace at all Costs! I’m doing what my dad did and this is what I used to hate him for! … or despise about him. Much in all as I really loved him and thought very highly of him. In this particular regards with a very dominant mother he used to just cry out for peace at all costs and do just about anything to stop the trouble. And, er, it usually failed in the attempt. But here I am doing the same thing!

Partly due to pragmatic advice from the officials, Henry takes his over-functioning tendency, compounded grief and depression with manifest physical tremors with him into his next two church placements. While still committed to Henry, his wife has not followed him into ministry and will have nothing to do with either churches or denominational figures to this day.

Barry Lawrence made a similarly ‘cathartic connection’ during interview where he revealed the connection between his life search for a violent father’s approval and his own thrice repeated reaction to resign in the face of disapproval from older church ‘elders’.

Anyway, shortly after that I went to him and said to my Dad, who had done things like hit me and knock me out and all that sort of thing, out of his own frustration I think, … Then I went to him

and after things had settled down a bit and I said “I know that we obviously won’t see eye to eye. We won’t always understand each other, … But I want you to know that I forgive you for anything, any complicity. I want to ask you can you start to work towards restoring a relationship.” He turned to me and said “Its too late.”

… That was half my life ago and it has continued on, and I have spent my life trying to win my fathers approval, to try to get him to accept me because I am different to him! I think as I’ve been working through it over the last few months that I have yet to see God as (any) different? I see God as my Father! Do you understand what I am saying! … I see Him as an autocrat and someone whose approval I have to work to earn! Even though I know I won’t, there’s nothing of me, …, that I can ever do that will win His approval per se.

These pastors’ stories repeatedly showed the overlap of internalised God representations in their unconscious world with the images of their parents. Their reactions, spurred on by theological-ideational justifications, made for an almost automatic transference of the dysfunctional patterns in response to parenting and roles played within their family of origins into their later life in the family of the church.⁸

Helpful Responses and Postures: The Reflective Realists

The RR’s, can be distinguished by their ability to take on board the criticisms of their opponents without letting them erase their sense of significance as unique selves with their own unique styles of leadership. The painful period is taken as an opportunity to reflect realistically upon their distinctive ministry contribution and gifted individuality. Louise Bardon saw the horrible experience as a chance to reflect deeply about her reasons for being in pastoral work and to clarify her real passions and gifting.

I do not ever see myself in a big church … but the community, the smaller group is my sustaining vision. To translate into a denominational expression is, well I’m not sure that’s where my heart is now. And that’s not something I would have said once. … At the moment I would see my place as in aged care chaplancy. That is my role now. I really see it as worthwhile. I never want to

⁸ The only difference between the OI and NRE pastors in this regard was the capacity to see this connection for themselves in hindsight.

again get entangled in the routines of what some call 'ministry'. Its really, well frankly, 'crap' as far as I can see; that sense of justifying yourself to people all the time. I mean I work hard enough!

A capacity to distance herself from automatic reactions and the intentions of others is a sign of significant emotional freedom.

Graeme Mcleish sees that his current rural position and ministry in general provides a real match for his personal uniqueness.

I still often think of other things and careers I might take. Particularly on Monday mornings! But no, I get a lot of affirmation from my ministry and I feel, ... 'cos I did have a lot of people resign from that church and say "You're a great bloke but you are not cut out for this job." And I guess I've had to work through all that inside myself and I look back at my whole life and I can't see any job that suits me more! I have a lot of idiosyncrasies and I think the pastorate accommodates them. ...

Also, reflection upon his previous ministry has resulted in a perspective that indicates a significant increase in differentiation. His new appreciative pastorate is in stark contrast to the determined opposition that sought to remove him from his earlier one.

For those in this group the experience has been formative despite the significant pain induced. And most critically there is a significant distinction in their view of God. In contrast with the NRE and OI types, these pastors reveal images of God that are allow for a far less clearly trusting view of God's Image. Their 'universe' functions through a 'covenantal' perspective. That is the RR can accept that God's sovereign ways are beyond their scrutiny. It was striking also that these three pastors drew less from philosophical theological categories and more from a sensitive biblical Theology of ministry. Moreover, they identify closely with and are sustained by those images of the prophets and apostles whose experiences of opposition and rejection paralleled their own. Louise Bardon drew solace from the promise of God to the prophet Ezekiel to "make his forehead hard against the forehead of his opponents" (Ezek. 3.1-11) She also felt a security in her relationship to lay some responsibility for her pains at Gods feet.

And I felt Like Jeremiah, that's why I love Jeremiah: "You seduced me and I was seduced! And now you know I've got this burning ... and I can't stop it. I've got to speak about it."

Graeme Mcleish drew comfort from the experiences of the Psalmist from the Psalms of lament.

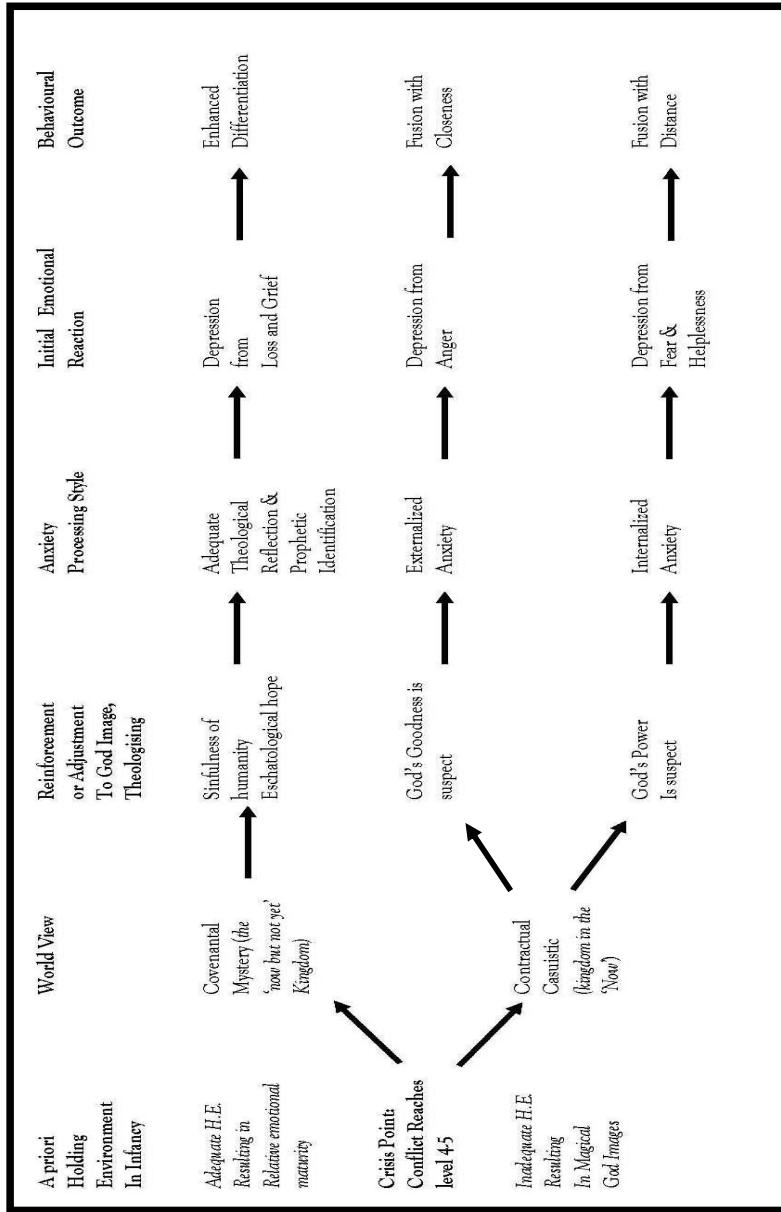
And the half [of the laments that turn positively] ... speak of doing all the right things, going through the pain and God doesn't come through with an answer! And they had no warrant to praise God unless God gave them warrant. ... They refused to indulge in fantasy or unreality. And so I did the same thing. ... Psalm 39 which speaks of a friend which plotted against him. "His words were sweet on the outside. Yet underneath they were treachery!" And I found that Psalm in particular extremely helpful. And in a way it helped me process my grief.

Human sin and God's sovereignty can coexist in a world where God and God's spokespersons have a history of suffering and vindication. Simplistic theological formulae provide no solace for the Reflective Realist. The formative or distorting impact of conflict-induced trauma leading to termination from these exponents reflects the particular structure of their world-view which determines their innate style for dealing with the anxieties that arise within them.

A Theory of Pastoral Cognition in Conflict

In the light of the above I would propose a tentative theory in the form of a series of stages of cognitions that separate out one type of pastoral response from another. It is represented in the diagram overleaf. It should be noted that this presentation tends to imply that these cognitions happen in a neat linear sequence when in fact such issues are interconnected, somewhat instantaneous and reflect an inter-play of pre-conscious God representations with emotional reaction and rational conscious decision making. Hopefully this presentation may give those seeking to care for such persons the capacity to infer 'backwards' from outward manifest behaviour to underlying world-views and God images and styles used by the pastor when processing their anxiety.

Reading from the right of the theoretical diagram we see there are three significant responses to traumatising conflict as ministry outcomes. Some pastors seem to become more solid selves as a result of the pain of these experiences. They learned to display a degree of emotional stability and to reflect dispassionately upon the incidents and characters in their past painful episodes. They recount periods of grief and loss and a disappointment in the inadequacy of the response from denominations.



Then there are those who appear still fused with the characters and located emotionally still within the distressing episodes of trauma. Some express this fusion in a determination to re-enter ministry, to seek vindication through a new appointment, to seek some sort of redress from the denominational administration. They tend to be reactive toward

the denominational structures that may facilitate this process, or if these doors do not open new pathways into ministry, their energies are diverted into blaming those in the denomination they perceive as responsible for their obstruction. In the interviews, one could not miss the palpable anger that is just beneath the surface of the recollections of these persons, even if they like Dale Chester, have now 'proven themselves' in a fruitful new pastorate. Although they become more dependent and draw 'closer' to the denomination, their anger is diverted outwards by the NRE type and the denomination is 'fair game' in this sort of script.

The second subset of this expression of emotional fusion tends to result in a 'con-fusion' and an internalising of the jibes and barbs from the period of conflict. The OI group generally move away from ministry and the denomination feeling themselves inadequate for the task, yet paradoxically still called and responsible to heed the call to ministry. This is a 'fusion with closeness' type response.⁹ These people lack the cynicism of the NRE toward the denomination but are often crushed in a secondary sense by what they perceive to be judgemental attitudes from the official institution regarding their capacity for fruitful ministry. They display a fearful affect; that they may be "broad-sided" by an attack from unforeseen opponents if in ministry, or, if not, that they may not ever be robust enough to handle another appointment.

Such responses would be simply curiosities of the phenomenon of pastoral conflicts if it were not also possible to correlate their internal emotional theatre to underlying theological and family scripts. To investigate these, we step back behind the responses to their anxieties to the impact of their experience upon their theology and read forward. Behind the fearful emotionality of the OI type is a suspicion that God's power may indeed be suspect. At least there is a shaking of the foundational holding environment provided by a faith in a God whose sovereignty is manifest and unambiguous. The NRE responses relate more to the personal attributes of God's Being; God's wisdom, goodness or grace being revised by their sorry experiences. Both of these views are difficult to address pastorally 'by frontal assault' as they are sustained by a type of theological grid, a world-view, held at the level of theological assumptions. They assume that this aeon is a stage in which God's purposes are worked out. When setbacks occur, these sagas find the zeniths in the vindication of the just in this place and time. I have termed this a 'contractual' worldview. The present pastorate sets the time limits in which their faithfulness will and must be rewarded. Not to do so

⁹ Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church*, 102

would lead to significant questions being raised about either God's goodness or the scope of his influence. This linear thinking is surprising given the level of formal theological training of those who operate out of this sort of theology. Greg Trethuen displays such a 'contractual' perspective here.

It would be meaningless if I couldn't use what I've learned. If I have no vocation, it would be an absurdity! ... If I was somehow told that I was never allowed to minister again, I would in fact wonder if there was a God; if there was a purposeful universe then surely a part of the process of suffering is to learn so we can help others learn? "Failure is never final" they say. The fact that I bomb out doesn't mean it's the end of the road. That would not be consistent with the idea of a good or loving God!

A vulnerable fragile grip on his own faith in God due in part to such a 'contractual' presupposition born of a direct connection between an God as Tutor image, an expectation of imminent vindication and his own call to ministry. No wonder his emotional outlook was so bleak and black.

In contrast, the RR lives within a hopeful and healthier cosmos. Paradoxically, they are able to find solace for their loss and grief, and rise out of their depression in part because they tend to have a healthier realism about the nature of sin and evil within the church. They can accept a world in which pathological forces can "take the day" trusting simultaneously in two foci: God's eschatological longer-term time scheme for involves righting of current wrongs, and a personal identification with persecuted prophetic servants in the Scriptures. Indeed their sufferings served to heighten their fellowship with Christ and therefore affirm their 'bona fides' as authentic servants of God. The capacity the RR group to have engaged in considered biblical reflection sets them apart from the other two whose theological reflection tends to be non-existent, contrived and 'after the fact'.¹⁰

For OI and NRE there is no consolation in theology.¹¹ It is this level of conscious theological assumption, that undergirds the type of over-functioning or under-functioning responses of these pastors as they

¹⁰ The only instances of the role of scripture in their thinking was a couple of instances where Pastors used the Scripture mystically and thought they had a direct promise from Christ communicated in the form of a text that "jumped out at them" (Henry Kenmore, Dale Chester). But this is far from a stable sustaining world-view.

¹¹ A Rizutto *The Birth of the Living God*, University of Chicago Press 1986.

process their experiences resulting in either an externalised or internalised perspective. Yet this fails to sustain them. This then serves as a limiting ‘template’ into which more or less adequate operating theology is ‘down-loaded’. Then the family of origin programming most likely explains the ‘valency’ of the pastor’s chosen God Image; which makes it an attractive but deficient source of consolation. Preferred God Images both reflect and reinforce the anxiety processing style inherited from the pastor’s family of origin. Such things are in train well prior to the supposedly ‘formative’ processing of the denomination or theological education, and may well affect the capacity for adequate theological reflection by these pastors. I conclude therefore with some Implications of this theory for denominational practices.

Denominational Role Playing: Culpability and Responsibility

That all groups, even the RR group who have moved beyond this conflict express at least a disappointment toward the denominational level of intervention, and post traumatic support is suggestive of a reality that requires significant self examination on the part played by denominational interventionists. Space does not allow for this feature to be expounded here. But the uniform and unprompted response of these pastors reflects an official denominational response that often was non-existent, at best naïve in their understanding of how the levels to which the conflict would develop, and usually far too enmeshed with both churches and key figures within the conflicts to provide any moral leadership within these relational systems.¹²

The lack of differentiation or impartiality of the executive is not reflected by avoidance and distancing. The office bearers of these denominations did not seem to recognize that they have a significant psychologically symbolic role akin to a parent figure relative to both churches and these pastors. This certainly has been presumed through *the processes* of formation that lead to ordination where the promotion of the pastor through the system is in the hands of often boards whose response reflects itself a form of ‘paternalistic’ or ‘autonomistic’ parenting. Compliance is total or the pastor in training can ‘take it or leave it’¹³ But beyond the pastoral placement it is as though accreditation

¹² Frequently the wrong types of persons were ‘sent into’ these situations. These “bean counters” barely masked their ulterior pragmatic motives under the cloak of official ‘peacemaking’.

¹³ C Cosgrove and D Hatfield *Church Conflict: The Hidden Systems Behind Church Fights*, Nashville, Abindgon, 1994, 73.

was just viewed as a gate through which the ordinand passed beyond which the responsibility of wider church to church-leader then ceased from that point of time.

But, according to the ‘radical ecclesiology’ that under-girds such a system this ordaining or accrediting is an ‘ordinance’ in which all involved espouse that in the actions of men God is doing “in and through human action”¹⁴ it is through such processes the wider churches affirm on behalf of the wider church through the mandating of Christ and the discerning of His pastoral call upon these lives. That such processes are effective can be seen here from the fact that despite their present circumstances, all these pastors still espouse a sense of being ‘made to minister’. To the same degree, the pastors vocational possibilities communicated through this formative process is that they have been welcomed into a fraternity who will reward the ‘hurdle jumping’ or preordination disciplines with a vocational security. If denominations such as these want such persons to adhere to such free-church ‘corporate mysticism’, they are morally bound with a degree of responsibility for the behaviours of their member churches.

This role comes with the responsibility to confront pathological persons within their ranks. Fear of unspoken reprisals or churches withdrawing their denominational support is most likely unfounded.¹⁵ A differentiated response at times like this would force the church to sift the presenting from the pretext issues before the watching eye of the other churches in their association, represented by the elected officials involved. Whatever the case, a just free-churchmanship demands a reciprocal commitment on the part of the association that must match that of the ordinand. When denominational officials absolve their lack of responsibility to respond as nurturing parents within the denominational system at such times in the name of ‘congregational autonomy,’ they are trading off their own security for the long term well being of pastors. Instead of really choosing church welfare over pastor welfare they in effect are reinforcing the sorts of cultures that will in fact erode the

¹⁴ John Howard Yoder *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*, Scotdale, Herald, 6.

¹⁵ It has not been noted, but to this insider, Baptist churches, in contrast with other ecclesiologies have an incredibly secular-utilitarian view of the pastor resulting in unrealistic and often unfair performance expectations, as represented by the recent spate of such churches employing rigorous review devices such as the 360 degree review. A review without a pastoral ‘holding environment’ lacks a theology of electing grace and is a sure recipe for burnout and abandonment. The erosion of a radical perspective on ordination in recent years for the more secular ‘accreditation’ moves in the same merciless direction.

future of these church families. Moreover, a denominational ‘quietism’ serves only to reinforce the standing of both neurotic cultures and neurotic individuals within the systems whose own shadow agendas inhibit the ‘freedom’ of these churches in the first place. When pathological agents within these churches are allowed to go unchecked from one pastoral generation to another, they only become experts in inducing pastoral pain and bullying. Paradoxically, groups such as these then become accustomed to their ‘dance’ and become dependent upon the neurotic and paranoid elements within them to serve their own primal fears and anxieties. There is nothing like a good crisis within a group espousing high ideals to generate dependency upon the paranoid within their ranks and to reward this with the charismatic mantle of ‘leadership’.¹⁶

If, as these persons attest, their identity is entwined with a complete sense of call to pastoral leadership, the corresponding sense of abandonment by denomination is tantamount to a failure of an adequate ‘holding environment’.¹⁷ If the mutual promises and affirmations of ordination are all suddenly vacuous pledges, and the loyalty only goes one way, the person of the pastor can suffer significant inner contradiction as a self. Feelings of worthlessness can either immobilize some or generate fanaticism in others. If the calling of a pastor is inseparable from their sense of identity, their own images of God are insufficiently sustaining, then the terminated pastor may believe that the whole fabric of their psyche is disintegrating. Like an infant they are being dropped from the arms of the church, the denomination and even the grace of God. “if my images die, I die”. Those entrusted with care of such pastors need to be prepared to sustain and support such persons with wisdom and sympathy so as to provide an alternative and dependable holding environment for that which has crumbled and made for such a complex of distressing symptoms and need to be accepted before the fearful prospect of the examination of one’s worldview and God Images can begin in earnest.¹⁸

¹⁶ Manfred Kets De Vries *Organizational Paradoxes: Clinical Approaches to Management*, 2nd Edition, New York, Rutledge, 1995, 11, 76-78.

¹⁷ A term deriving from the field of ‘object relations’ psychology as particularly developed by DW Winnicott *The Family and Individual Development*, London, Tavistock Institute, 1965 and expanded in its ecclesial manifestations in WW Meisner’s *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984.

¹⁸ This also points to the need for a rethink of ministry formation. A combination of good biblical theology needs to be supplemented by forms and reflective processes that really place the ministry candidate in realistic situations

Conclusion: Six Implications for Post Termination Aftercare

This study and the discriminations implied by the theory suggested have some implications for those entrusted with the care of such pastors.

- i. The ultimate purpose of such a process would be to help them become more differentiated selves, less emotionally conditioned by the variations of strong figures within their church lives and to emotionally detach from the scene of their past experience that continue to inhabit their field of vision and also serve them well as cultivators of differentiated maturational church cultures in future. This is consistent with the tenets of family systems theory.
- ii. But in contrast to family systems theory that address anxiety as a present family system dysfunction, God images and worldviews stem from and interplay with primal developmental issues. The narratives shared here suggest that focussing upon the family of origin issues of these pastors alone would not represent the sustaining psychological structures of their persons as believers. These pastors should be assisted to work through their angers and disillusionments back through to the examination of their assumptions and their theological foundation for ministry. In fact this should happen prior to 'accreditation'¹⁹. This is more than just seeing if they can espouse the 'official party line' or the denominational shibboleths.
- iii. This task requires the pastor be given safe spaces for examination of their experiences and interpretations throughout and beyond the traumatic times. Through such a process the adequacy of their God Images, the possible confusion of these with internalised parental representations and the limitations of particular worldviews need to surface.

where they have real responsibilities. Only then can they effectively 'join the churches emotional system' and experience first hand the constraining forces of anxiety and learn about their own reactions and rationalizations before their vocation begins in earnest. The sheer horror of all their stories would also be a strong argument in favour of psychologically testing all pastoral persons to assess the stability of their persons and their capacity to handle the rigours of leadership in a differentiated manner. Academic credentials alone are no measure of such things or of the theology out of which a pastor will operate under extreme stress.

¹⁹ But this is unlikely to happen if churches continue the vogue habit of 'doing their own thing' or 'appoint talent from within' without reference to the wider church processes of ordination and sensitive spiritual direction within this.

- iv. For such a process to be at all effective however, the persons involved must be able to provide for the pastor an alternative and effective 'holding environment'. The pastor needs to be able to trust those who take responsibility for such issues. If these persons are seen as representatives of an abandoning denominational parent this is hardly likely to be the case. Merely outsourcing pastoral care of bruised pastors is very much a second best to taking such critical moments as opportunities to demonstrate the mutuality of the pledge of pastor to church expressed by ordination/accreditation.
- v. One should be wary of interpreting the stories these pastors tell simplistically or superficially. The presenting symptoms of either anger with closeness to the denomination, or, self doubt and distancing behaviour should not imply the pastor has lost a sense of pastoral calling or convictional basis for their ministry. Those who show an eagerness to 'jump back on the horse' of leadership may well not be that ready but could be forestalling the expression of their anger until later times. Their fixations with and within ministry reflect longings for vindication that need to be challenged. Those who self-disqualify need to discover that possibly their position has to do with their self under construction rather than their true qualifications.
- vi. Finally, and most importantly, it is would seem to be a critical component of both the formation of pastors in training as well as those in ministry leadership to have some critical instruction in the processes of reconciling dialogue such as are outlined in Matthew 18. 15-20 and exemplified elsewhere in the New Testament. Tragically none of these pastors had any sense of the historical foundations of such a critical process as the 'rule of Christ' for their forbears or could comprehend its theological origins in Christ's vision of the new humanity. The capacity to express their own offence and to confront those who offend the peace of Christ in our churches is dependent upon a view of reality that is real, objective and discussable and a trust that the church is competent to cope with this judicial responsibility (2 Cor. 6.1-8). Although much has been said elsewhere about the centrality of such processes for radical congregationalism²⁰, the experiences of these pastors and such a radical ecclesiology

²⁰ See the first penetrating Chapter of John Howard Yoder's exposition in his *Body Politics*.

would suggest that the spiritual maturation and emotional differentiation of such persons and the churches they serve would only be enhanced by these churches learning the process habit of surfacing the covert politics and sinfulness that is at the genesis of these pastoral tragedies and indeed of all evil.

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