

**Literature Review:
Characteristics of Toxic Churches**

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A TWO PAGE PRIMER ON TOXIC CHURCHES

These two pages provide a quick and accessible introduction to the concept of toxic churches in the context of clergy health. It is organized using questions as a way to introduce relevant issues. Following this short introduction, there is a longer document with more in-depth citation and referencing of literature and resources concerning toxic churches and the health effects on clergy of such environments.

There are two meanings of the phrase “Toxic Churches” in the health and social science literature.

- 1) *An organization in which the collective/cumulative effect of multiple stressors of a disconsonant nature intrude upon the relationship of a clergy person and a congregation resulting in dissatisfaction for both parties and very often, health consequences for the clergy person.*
- 2) *An organization that has lost focus from its traditional foundations and misappropriated a marketing/business approach to attract congregants; very often an organization in which the focus is on works, in which “doing” is much more important than “being”. In this instance, both clergy and congregation are focused in the same direction of organizational promotion. Over time, it is possible for both congregants and clergy to be exploited in the allegiance to “doing” thereby demonstrating the practical (arguably, secularized) value of faith and church participation. Worship for the glorification of God and education to nurture spiritual formation and health among congregation members is lost as foundational foci for the organization. This environmental tenor can be insidious.*

The former concept is most congruent with the mission of the Church Systems Task Force in its focus on what The United Methodist Church might structurally undertake to improve clergy health and well-being.

- 1) Can the key/critical characteristics of toxic churches be articulated?

No set of characteristics of a toxic church seem to be universal. What may be a toxic environment to one clergy person may not be to another.

What can be said of toxic environments is that there is dissonance between the pastor and the congregation. Matching of clergy strengths and congregational needs in the appointment process can go a long way toward fostering a healthy relationship between clergy and congregation. Functional congregations have in common:

- i. *support for clergy*
- ii. *balance of clergy influence and congregational autonomy*
- iii. *openness of the congregation to the clergy*
- iv. *community involvement by clergy*

v. church goals/policies rooted in theology and tradition.

- 2) How would these characteristics/elements match with a clergy person's characteristics/behaviors?

There is little specific research assessing and detailing characteristics of both church environments and the pastors for whom it is toxic. Mueller and McDuff (2004) observed in one sample of clergy, pastors who were more theologically and socially liberal than their congregation were significantly less satisfied than those whose beliefs were matched more closely with the beliefs of their parishioners. Other factors include gender, ethnicity, age, salary satisfaction, church size and location (small metropolitan and large urban congregations engender less satisfaction compared to small rural churches (Nelsen and Everett 1976)).

- 3) What are some of the "remedies" for clergy to deal with a toxic church?

Clearly some methods brought in from program planning may be of merit here. Identifying an organizational mission and how clergy and congregation can work together to pursue a common purpose would be foundational cornerstones in efforts to "turn the ship about" or foster an attitudinal "sea change". This means asking the right questions of the right people; to be willing to ask the hard questions --- why something is the way it is.

As a corollary to this program planning approach, congregations for which the focus remains on doctrine (particularly justification by faith and the role of mission) and that nurture a loving and supportive environment are more likely to be able to foster the characteristics of functional congregations noted above.

- 4) It seems that the SPRC has some role to play in a toxic church situation. Can the role be described in terms of both the SPRC's positive influence (part of the remedy) and negative influence (part of the cause)?

Where the SPRC is supportive of characteristics of functional congregations, their role can be invaluable. By the same token, if the SPRC lacks confidence in the ability of the clergy to address the needs of the congregation, this can surely be detrimental.

- 5) Do we know if toxic churches cause people to go on disability, to seek extension ministries, to exit ministry?

There is some evidence that toxic churches lead pastors to desire to exit the ministry (Nelsen and Everett, 1976) or to change churches (Wildhagen, Mueller and Wang, 2005) but nothing explicit re: disability. This suggests an opportunity to do some qualitative work with people on disability or who have left the ministry to find out why.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CHARACTERISTICS OF TOXIC CHURCHES

There are a variety of issues that have been shown to plague the relationships between ministers and their parishioners. These issues can lead to emotional exhaustion (Miner 2007; Doolittle 2007), stress (Weaver, Flannelly, Larson, Stapleton & Koenig 2002), clergy familial problems (Frame & Shehan 1994; Darling, Hill & McWey 2004), and the desire to leave the ministry (Nelsen & Everett 1976) or current church (Hang-yue, Foley & Loi 2005). The issues may manifest themselves in a variety of ways including:

- Openness of congregation;
- Community involvement;
- Congregational generosity;
- Congregational support;
- Authority of clergy within church;
- Role of clergy within the church.

The degree to which the congregation is open to the minister's ideas seems to have an effect on the relationships between a pastor and his/her parishioners. Nelson and Everett (1976) have suggested that parishioners' "willingness to study and be trained" has an impact on clergy satisfaction. It has also been found that controversial sermon topics, stances, and views on doctrine lead to quarrels between parishioners and ministers (Mitchell 1967) suggesting that congregations whose members are more willing to consider and discuss ideas different from their own would be more supportive of and open to a greater number of clergy.

The commitment by clergy and parishioners to community involvement may be an indicator of the toxicity of the church. Ministers who are involved in their communities are less likely to be searching for other jobs (Windhagen, Mueller & Wang 2005), and members' desire to share their witness increases clergy satisfaction (Nelson & Everett 1976). *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* also encourages community involvement and sharing the gospel (§122) as part of the process of carrying out the mission of the church.

Windhagen et al. (2005) found that ministers are less likely to search for other jobs if they feel they are being compensated fairly for the work they do, and a large church budget decreases the likelihood that a minister is searching. Mitchell (1967) found that both the youngest and oldest members of the clergy receive the lowest salaries, possibly leading to a perception of unfair compensation. These associations may reflect a relationship between the level of tithing and a general sense of generosity within a congregation and the members' relationship with the clergy.

Congregational support was also found to be a significant factor in the clergy-congregation relationship (Windhagen et al. 2005). This finding holds no surprise, and it is not a leap to assume that an unsupportive attitude would contribute to the level of openness, generosity, and community involvement.

Another issue related to congregational support for clergy may be the level of authority given to the clergy. Chaves (1994) has suggested that secularization is not declining religion as has been theorized but that “secularization is best understood ... as the declining scope of religious authority.” He says evidence of this declining authority has been seen in the United States. Rassieur (1982) suggests that weakened authority in the church may relate to low self esteem (cited in Miner, Sterland, & Dowson 2006). Miner et al. suggest that the authority given to clergy by individuals is declining and is evidenced by individuals “shopping around” for churches (citing Whetham & Whetham 2000) and results in clergy work overload (citing Willimon 1989). Furthermore, Mueller and McDuff (2004) found that autonomy and participation in decision making increased job satisfaction in a sample of clergy. Miner et al have developed the *Orientations to the Demands of Ministry Scale* that may be useful in future research on clergy. Congregations who do not value clergy authority may not be allowing the minister to live out his/her role as described in the *Book of Discipline*: “Ordained ministers are called to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world and the promise of God for creation” (§ 138). This limitation would likely be a major cause of stress for the clergy.

The role or roles that clergy assume within their congregations may also contribute to the relationship that he or she has with parishioners. Different congregations have different expectations of pastors, and these expectations, as well as the fit of these expectations with clergy’s ideas and gifts (Wildhagen et al. 2005) have an impact on clergy’s satisfaction. Conflicts about administrative tasks seem to cause much unrest in the pastor – parishioner relationship (Mitchell 1967) as does the expectation for ministers to counsel their parishioners (Mitchell 1967; Rolfe 1985). Rolfe suggests that this role of minister as psychotherapist may lead to decreased opportunity for clergy to experience friendship within the congregation and decreased contact with parishioners involving Christian education, service opportunities, spiritual growth, and church doctrine and tradition. Clergy may be expected to tend to parishioners during all times of the day, including times traditionally spent with family and friends (Rolfe). This expectation is associated with “intra-family strains,” a major source of stress for both clergy and their spouses (Darling, Hill & McWey, 2004).

Several larger issues may contribute to the stressors described above which can create a toxic church. The age of a minister is related to several factors that influence the minister’s level of satisfaction including salary, the relationship he/she has with parishioners, the role assumed within the church, and the tendency to bring up controversial issues (Mitchell 1967). Size and location of the congregation seems to be important: ministers serving small metropolitan churches and large urban churches seem particularly unsatisfied, and ministers serving small rural churches are especially satisfied (Nelsen & Everett 1976). Therefore, more research needs to be done to clarify the characteristics of small, moderate and large churches in urban, metropolitan and rural areas in order to examine their defining characteristics. A mismatch between clergy and parishioners should also be examined in more depth. Mueller and McDuff (2004) found that in one sample of clergy, pastors who were more theologically and socially liberal

than their congregations were significantly less satisfied than those whose beliefs were matched more closely with the beliefs of their parishioners. These issues may be underlying causes for poor congregational support, the level of clergy authority, lack of relationship with parishioners and other disagreements, but more research is needed to determine the nature of these possible associations.

John Setser, author of *Broken Hearts, Shattered Trust*, and others, however, believe that leaders (i.e. pastors) perpetuate, if not begin, the process of a congregation becoming a toxic church. Bill Jackson provides a summary of *Toxic Faith* by Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton in which a toxic faith is described as an addiction in which the leader of a toxic faith system is a “Persecutor” who claims “a special pipeline to God which places them at a level above all the others in the church.” This language may cast the pastor as too much of a villain for most situations, but the description of the active church member as the enabler may hit closer to home. “They are getting their worth serving something ‘significant’ They hope for but are afraid to work for change. Instead, they work like beasts of burden because they feel responsible for everything.” In a blog by Melanie Dobson, Shelley Bates describes the heroine in her book as suffering from “the insidious toxicity known as ‘salvation by works.’” Bates says that “one of the hallmarks of a toxic church is an emphasis on working one’s way to salvation instead of rejoicing in the grace that is ours because of the sacrifice of Jesus.” This is of course in direct contradiction to the doctrine of The United Methodist Church which says, “We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings” (*Book of Discipline*, ¶ 103, Article IX).

According to the discussion above, functional congregations seem to have several things in common: congregational support for the clergy, a balance of clergy influence and congregational autonomy on committees and in decisions, openness of the congregation to the clergy, community involvement, and church goals and policies rooted in theology and tradition. Clergy and congregations should strive to build relationships with these characteristics and to maintain focus on church doctrines such as justification by faith, being a missional church, and clergy authority among others. Mollenkott (1993) suggests that if we take Micah 6:8 to heart and that if the structure of the church supports its mission, “each [church] must be restructured in such a way as to do justice to everyone, to love kindness toward everyone, and to walk humbly with our God within everyone.” This loving and supportive model of a church must also apply to the relationship between the congregation and the clergy.

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