

When a cleric has a flashback to a church fight the flash back is an instant horrendous replay of the whole soul destroying event. For most it is worse than any acrimonious divorce or even a death in the family. After the stress created by unfair treatment by the church they love the cleric is never the same. Post traumatic stress syndrome is devastating real yet never acknowledged or talked about. It is the cause of marriage breakup suicide and a host of personal problems in the lives of clergy.

As I look back over my 45 years of ministry I realize that there were three such 'fights' in my career.

The first one was when I was a student minister and my supervising pastor almost ruined my career before it got started. He was a burned out, defeated old alcoholic with a reputation for chewing up young students but reason prevailed and I survived his imaginary complaints. That was my wake up call but I missed it.

Second, years later I got caught between two factions in a congregation in Toronto. I went to church bureaucrats for help. Instead of help I was immediately screwed bigtime by Presbytery and conference staff. The very people I went to for help, support and council did me in so swiftly I didn't have time to do anything but run. Reading the tea leaves I resigned quickly and moved to another situation. Later I realized that even though I resigned and left these cowards had fired me. Oh I got away but make no mistake at the emotional level I was fired and devastated

I real knock em down fight erupted soon after I arrived at my new charge at Metcalfe now part of Ottawa. The local church clergy killer didn't like my face. She had the ear of the local Presbytery jock that by then had heard the imaginary dirt on me from his pals in Toronto and I was dead meat. The olde verbal blackball attack.

As usual the procedural rules were made up as they went along with lots of secret meetings. Gossip and hearsay ruled. Every time I tried to find out the charges against me and who was making them I ran into the familiar refrain 'Sorry we can't tell you because of the rules of confidentiality.' Confidentiality is always used against the innocent!

Fortunately for me before she could bring me down she got frustrated by the process as I fought back and transferred her membership to a neighboring congregation who had a corset kissing 'keep em' happy minister. Her leaving with her group of six crazy makers was enough to make me think I had won the lottery. I went on to have a happy fruitful 25 years in that pastoral charge.

Now these examples hurt me but pale in comparison to the over 3000 tales clergy have shared with me since 1982 when I began the clergy abuse network. Reports from all traditions make my conflicts seem like small potatoes. But make no mistake I suffer clergy post traumatic stress syndrome like every one else that has gone through a church fight. If you're alive and serving, when the severe stress of a congregational conflict comes you will experience the same syndrome.

The point I want to make is once one is s traumatized by the injustices one experiences in a church fight one is never the same. After a church fight you can be ministering along having a great time but let one person make any 'threatening' noise toward you and the whole series of memories come flooding back. Panic,fear,anger,the sweats, all come back..

WHAT IS POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER?

The diagnosis of PTSD requires exposure to an extreme

Stressor and a characteristic set of symptoms that have lasted for a while. What is an extreme stressor?

Make up your list of extreme causes of stress. In clergy there is only one cause.

A church fight. When a minister is treated unfairly with little hope for truth or justice that is the extreme stressor par excellence! The pastor's very call to serve God is attacked and sometimes destroyed. Destroy a call and you destroy the one who gave up all to answer that call. In the process they are ruined financially and damaged emotionally. Careers and reputations destroyed and spiritual journeys hijacked.

How do you know if you're A Clergy with PTSD? Well you will have some or all of the following three main types of symptoms:

1) Re-experiencing of the traumatic event as indicated by:

- Intrusive distressing recollections of the event
- Flashbacks (feeling as if the event were recurring while awake)
- Nightmares (the event or other frightening images recur frequently in dreams)
- Exaggerated emotional and physical reactions to triggers that remind the person of the event

2) Avoidance and emotional numbing as indicated by:

- extensive avoidance of activities, places, thoughts, feelings, or conversations related to the trauma
- Loss of interest
- Feeling detached from others
- Restricted emotions

3) Increased arousal (and I don't mean sexual), as indicated by:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Hyper vigilance (I like to call this creative paranoia :o))
- An exaggerated startle response

However, there are other problems that are also common.

Panic attacks for instance, are very common. Individuals who have experienced a trauma may have panic attacks when exposed to something that reminds them of the past trauma. Sometimes we feel like we are going crazy. On and on goes the list but you get my drift.

The greatest problem for clergy with this disorder is that it makes it almost impossible to deal creatively with a second conflict when one begins to arise in the next congregation one serves. Many clergy having been so damaged by a church fight they never really minister again.

They talk the talk but don't walk the walk. They are so battered that they now spend their careers 'playing' at church. They make sure they do nothing to arouse the beast of conflict again. They become sad little smiling pastor perfect faces pathetic in their being. Kissing up to anything that moves. Others who were abused become the abusers. Getting into positions of power and authority in the bureaucracy. Now they are with the beast not trying to survive the beast. All because they hope by being with the abusers they themselves will not be hurt again. These are the pathetic ones.

Now to the 'so what'. How do we deal with it! I wish I had the answer. Some of us will need a caring psychiatrist and perhaps a pill or two; a loving pastoral care giver can help others! Some by supportive friends and family. Some will need to get out of the church period and find ways to be obedient to their call to serve in a new context.

There is a magic wand we can wave. There is no one to kiss and make better. The wounds are deep.

I have lost two children to death. A beautiful girl child of nine months and a great son in his 30s. Terrible as these events were I must admit that the treatment I received at the hands of alleged loving Christians hurt far worse. I can deal with the grief of out living two of our children. I can even now some years later remember them in new and healing ways. I can even rejoice in their memories from time to time. Make no mistake the deep loss is still there.

I would be less than honest if I didn't say that the stupid suffering of church fight is far more different and more difficult to deal with. My fight in 1979 is as real this moment as it was then. The hurt, the anger, the injustice, the pain can come flooding in that I am almost paralyzed. But now it's not for long.

I think I am one tough son of a bitch but I crumble in the memory of fights past. Will I ever heal? Never completely. The damage is done. I have been in hell and I have met 'them'. Only clergy know of what I speak. Just as only those who suffered in war know what others suffered in war feel. This is the silent shame across all Churches.

But hey! On the positive side, I laugh in triumph each day. Sometimes each hour. I have run the race, I finished my course in the church and I am still very much alive. I can't believe it! I still have most of my integrity. That has got to count for something.

The big bonus is that I am out of the church where the danger from the 'they' exists no more. I am save from the 'christians'.

The real bonus is that my time experiencing the insane evil of the Church let me to a far greater ministry. The privilege of standing with thousands of other hurting clergy, their friend and family for well over 30 years. Did any change come about? Not much but a vast change came about in me!!!

To clergy reading this. You will make it.

You will need to recognize the triggers, the symptoms and live with and through them. You will need to get help staying out of denial but you will make it! Post traumatic stress syndrome was something we heard happened to vets in war and it does. Sadly the symptoms are the same in clergy who have gone through these soul wrenching church wars.

It is time we recognize this syndrome, surface it and begin to talk about it. It is up to the churches to acknowledge the damage clergy post traumatic stress syndrome has done to countless clergy. It is time to get on with making sure its causes are dealt with in a fair and just manner. For too long clergy have been chewed up by this evil, while the churches looking the other way pass by on the other side going on in their business as usual way.

All that does is allow the cycle of hurt to repeat itself and allow outside observers of the church to say sardonically: 'see how they love one another'

In my heart I know nothing will change until clergy band together to say 'enough'. Clergy need to be organized for their own protection. Alone they can do nothing. Together they can confront and defeat this evil. Will it happen. Not in my lifetime but yes it willsomeday. God wills it so.

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Comments?