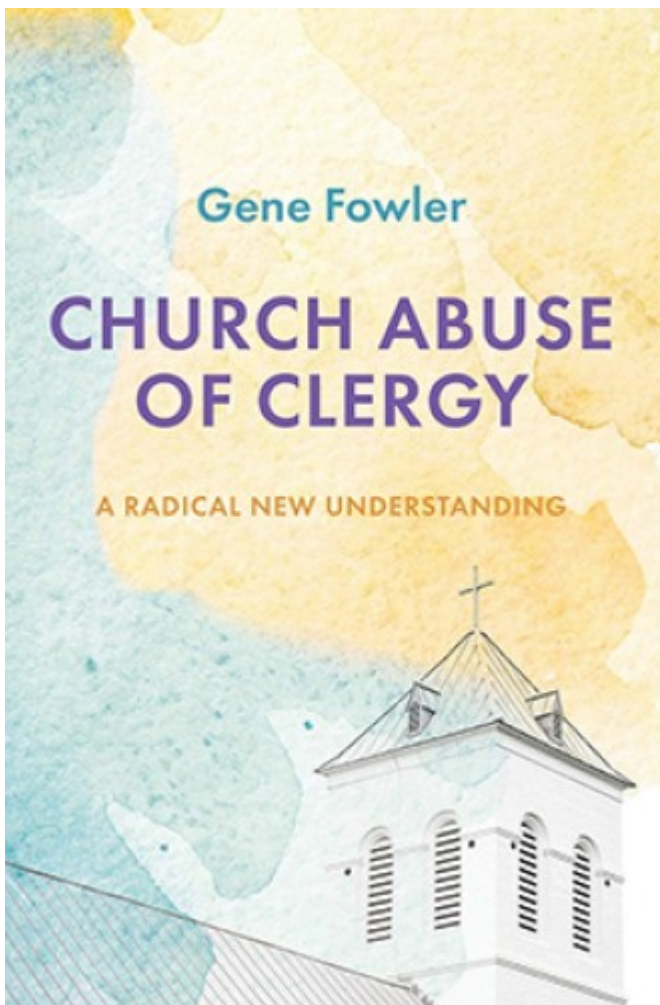


How dying churches abuse pastors

Gene Fowler examines why traumatized congregations so often attack their leaders.

by [Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner](#) in the [May 6, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Church Abuse of Clergy

A Radical New Understanding

By Gene Fowler

Cascade Books

Long before the coronavirus pandemic shuttered church doors, attendance was in decline in mainline denominations. When attendance is down, financial decline follows. Some churches close; others reduce staff or clergy. Amid this agonizing demise of congregations, Gene Fowler offers a bold account of the toll this decline takes on congregations and clergy.

Fowler focuses on abusive church systems, which he carefully distinguishes from church conflict. Conflict is a dispute or serious disagreement that begins with a particular issue, such as the use of a flag in the sanctuary or a proposed building project. Church conflict is interpersonal, whether it occurs between individuals or among cliques in the congregation.

Church abuse of clergy is quite different. It's a pattern driven by the congregation's social unconscious reaction to traumatization. Fowler skillfully builds on the work of Wilfred R. Bion (who helped develop the theory behind psychoanalytic group psychology—including the power of the herd instinct) in explaining how this trauma plays out in congregations.

The motivation for church abuse is usually fear, Fowler explains, and this fear can be especially acute in times of palpable decline. As members of a congregation consider the annihilation of the church they've long known and revered, they experience a collective trauma. No longer able to maintain an idealistic image of themselves, they fall into denial and then fear. Abuse may also stem from ancestral trauma that's passed on to a congregation from a previous generation.

Fowler tells the story of decline across several generations, beginning with Robert Wuthnow's premise that the 1950s were marked by "a spirituality of dwelling." After the chaos of World War II and the Korean War, people needed to view the church as a safe space, a sacred place in which to be nurtured, a spiritual home where they did not have to think too much. This was the heyday of the popular children's rhyme, "Here is the church; here is the steeple. Open the doors; see all the people."

The 1960s, Fowler explains, "constituted the initial period in the story of Protestantism's trauma-producing membership decline in the United States." The spirituality of dwelling was replaced by a "spirituality of seeking." "Sacred moments of experiencing the divine and a continuing spiritual journey replaced sacred space

and the need to know the sacred territory.” This major cultural and ecclesiastical shift stretched across subsequent decades, even as it went largely unnamed.

Christians who see their image of the steeple church shattered are often traumatized by this shift. The shattering of a beloved image is a loss that many congregants find unbearable. They realize that they cannot depend on the church’s culture—including its clergy—to remedy the shocking sense of annihilation that comes with the displacement they’re experiencing.

“When congregations must defend themselves against confronting their fear of congregational annihilation at all costs, their effort is at the expense of the pastor and the pastor’s loved ones,” Fowler explains. In their pain, the congregation begins the movement to get rid of their pastor—even when there is no reason justifying such a move. Common tactics include defamation of character, casting of shame, forced termination, and unemployment.

The idea that certain conditions lead congregations to abuse their pastors is not new. In 1997, G. Lloyd Rediger published *Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors and Congregations under Attack*. Rediger portrays the typical clergy killer as an individual who has built up power in the congregation through longevity, lineage, financial contributions, or influence. His or her actions are spurred by factors such as childhood trauma, projections, transferences, violent role models, inadequate socialization, personality disorders, or authoritarian issues. This instigator gathers a few others into the defamation process, which builds and eventually infects the whole congregation.

Fowler takes a fundamentally different approach. Instead of focusing on a lone instigator of clergy abuse, Fowler identifies “the congregation as a whole . . . as the abuser, which of course includes all of the church members and other participants in the congregation.” This focus on the congregation as a whole makes space for radical new understandings of the formation and growth of congregational clergy abuse.

Church Abuse of Clergy is a library unto itself. Fowler offers an extensive review of theological and social scientific literature on the topic of clergy abuse. He also includes a chapter on the legal status of abused clergy. Because of the ministerial exception language that emerged in response to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964), ministers do not have employment rights regarding employment

discrimination that others in the United States have. Although this interpretation has been challenged, clergy do not currently have employment protection or unemployment benefits under the law.

Fowler uses statistics and case studies to detail the effects of church abuse on clergy and their immediate families. A ministerial termination can lead to struggles for financial survival, the loss of reputation and ministerial identity, emotional harm, psychological trauma, and sometimes even illness and death. The stories Fowler shares are sobering. As I read, I found myself wondering whether church abuse of clergy might be categorized as a form of *moral injury*.

In the traditional image of the church, we could “open the door and see all the people”—intact families worshiping together regularly just as their parents had modeled. As this image dies out and its annihilation traumatizes people, some of the most significant pastoral work will include the midwifery of emergent new images. It will also be important to strategize on early methods of trauma intervention for both the congregation and the clergy. This is a new frontier for pastoral care; lives are in the balance.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Why dying churches abuse pastors.”