

Communities of grace, joy, and peace? When the church causes suffering

Dorothy Nickel Friesen

The telephone rang at our home. A fellow staff member asked, “Did you get your paycheck today?” Of course I had. “Well, I didn’t,” she replied. “Is there a mix-up of some kind?” As head of a multi-staff congregation, I called other members of the team and discovered that some had been paid their monthly salary, but others had not. Then I phoned the church treasurer and reported this odd occurrence. Were some of the paychecks misplaced? Put in another location for safekeeping? “No,” came the treasurer’s answer. “The bank account was too low to cover all the staff salaries this month, so I decided who should be paid and who would not be paid this month. I will issue the other checks when the cash flow is better.” I was furious, dumbfounded, distressed, and insulted. He had rated us more and less worthy, with characterizations such as “female supported by a husband” and “single with another job.” And he seemed oblivious to the friction and hurt his approach had caused. “What are you complaining about?” he asked me. “You got paid!” I phoned the chair of the staff relations committee and urged that amends be made without delay.

Things were not going well in a churchwide institution. Contributions were shrinking as potential donors working in an agriculture-based economy were struggling to make ends meet. Having completed the required years of service, the organization’s pastor still received a sabbatical, because an ecumenical agency had awarded him a hefty grant. The sabbatical proved to be a rich time of rest, retreat, and renewed vigor for the pastor. Meanwhile, the leadership of the institution determined that finances were so compromised that major change was in order. So the pastor returned from sabbatical to discover that his full-time position had been reduced to half-time; he had received no warning and had not been consulted. The pastor was told that even the half-

time position was tenuous. With his livelihood on the line, he resigned, deeply hurt.

It was review time for a pastor who had served conscientiously and capably for six years. The congregation conducted a pastoral review, complete with questionnaires and interviews, which revealed, in general, a fine ministry. About 50 percent of the congregation's adult regular attenders participated in the written review. But some people returned unsigned questionnaires that included vicious personal attacks, replete with criticism of all the congregation's leaders and accusations of abuse of power. The deacons were stunned but could not track the anonymous accusations and decided to ignore the unsigned questionnaires. They reported the findings of the other questionnaires at the congregational meeting. When the congregation voted on reappointment, the affirmative vote was an abysmal 69 percent, a far smaller margin than the pastor had ever received before. He resigned. His wife wrote a hostile letter and placed it in all the church mailboxes the next Sunday. She never set foot in the building again.

The pastor of a new urban congregation happened to walk by the front door of the church as a young couple entered. She greeted them warmly, offered a Sunday morning bulletin, and directed them to the sanctuary. The service began, according to the printed order of service. When the pastor stood to preach, the couple glanced at each other and put their heads down. After the service, they confronted the pastor at the door: "We are opposed to women in ministry. Had we known that you were the preacher and not just the greeter, we would never have set foot in your church."

These stories recount events from my life in pastoral ministry in the Mennonite church. They are examples of the types of suffering that happen in our system and in other denominations. In what follows I identify four kinds of suffering caused by the church.

The suffering of opposition

Most pastors and church leaders must deal with opposition at some point in their ministry. Sometimes that opposition comes from theological differences, sometimes from outright mistakes, and other times from divergent understandings of the role and

authority of the pastor. The opposition may take the form of gentle criticism and critique that makes understanding and change possible. Other times, the opposition may take the form of gossip, underhanded maneuvering by church leaders, and even anonymous accusations that provide ample fuel for destructive conflict.

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All leaders should be prepared for opposition. In fact, healthy dialogue, even conflict, can yield tremendous growth, insight, and strength. However, an opposition that abuses power by intending to wound is always wrong.

Learning to read the opposition, learning to understand the culture of critique, is a pastoral skill.

The suffering of correction

I once made the mistake of sharing from the pulpit news of a parishioner's health crisis that was widely known in the community but which I had not heard directly from the person who was ill. An angry e-mail sent me to the person's home without delay, with a heartfelt apology and evident embarrassment. I had overstepped my bounds and I needed to suffer remorse—but I was also forgiven for my error in judgment. My impulse was to provide support, but the person I hoped to help experienced my action as a violation. My time-out experience made me sad but also bolstered my resolve to watch the boundaries of my power more carefully.

By extension, conference ministers must sometimes “correct” the pastors for whom they provide oversight. When pastors make mistakes, whether these are errors in judgment (for example, insisting on one's own agenda even when other congregational leaders are reluctant to proceed) or errors in the use of pastoral privilege (for example, inappropriate jokes or secret meetings with “needy” parishioners), they must be corrected. Confronting people in power is not easy, and it entails risk. However, good training and careful spiritual preparation are pathways to constructive correction and redirection.

The suffering of omission

Being ignored, not taken seriously, or overlooked can happen in overt or subtle ways. Statistics revealing the lack of women in leadership in many Mennonite institutions are astounding. The lack of employees representing other racial/ethnic groups in most Mennonite institutions, conferences, agencies, and congregations is sinful. We have omitted from our circles of power those who in various ways are seen to be “not like us.”

The voice of the young is often missing in conversations about leadership of the church. Appointing high school youth to a search committee is one of the best mentoring experiences we can offer thoughtful teenagers. Benign neglect is often expressed as

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The suffering of oppression

While we can certainly correct some oversights with simple affirmative actions of advocating for inclusion of qualified and gifted leaders of color in all levels of our church structures, we must not let the omissions create a pattern of normalcy—allowing

us to maintain a system that is unjust. By their very absence in our churchly experience, “others” become objects and strangers rather than friends and companions on this faith journey. Oppression yields greater suffering. Systemic oppression continues unnoticed and unopposed, stealing life from every institution and structure that allows it a safe haven. Oppression uses power in an evil way.

The church, as an institution, causes suffering through oppression in a variety of ways: by rigid constitutions instituted long ago; through customs and traditions that have little to do with theological or biblical integrity and instead reflect cultural expectations; in structures that insist on privileging one person or group over another; through unchecked personal power; and from lack of understanding of institutional and systemic power.

In *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*, James Newton Poling writes about human resistance to oppressive power:

Power in its ideal form is the energy of life itself as it is organized into the relational web that includes us all. This primal relational power is distorted through human sin by individuals and societies into abuse of power and is the cause of much human suffering. Through resistance to the abuse of power and the work of God's love in Jesus Christ, the human spirit is made resilient. We search for the resilient hope of the human spirit, which can resist abuse and create new communities for the restoration of communion and freedom of self, others and God.¹

Signs of hope

How can we heal and prevent the suffering the church causes?

In our worship, we can regularly include prayers for healing, anointing, and other visible practices that help us foster patterns of kindness, compassion, and reconciliation. We can develop and lead rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation. We can sing songs and hymns of hope, healing, forgiveness, love, mercy. We can create and present poetry and stories that give voice to suffering but also to the power of imagination and hope. We can preach about the suffering of God and the theology of suffering.²

In our training for pastors and other church leaders, we can teach about suffering—its roots and its expressions. We can educate leaders about structures and systems that may cause suffering and about ways the faithful community can address suffering. We can produce literature, offer seminars, and invite all church leaders to grow in their capacity to identify power and use it redemptively.

In our structures, policies, and procedures, we can provide for education about and prevention of employee and pastoral abuse. We can develop healthy pastoral review processes and create congregational systems of oversight that lead to pastoral growth and congregational vitality. We can connect congregational to regional denominational structures to assist in thoughtful pastoral search processes, written covenants of understanding, and clear and appropriate job expectations and financial and benefit packages. We can insist on Sabbath practices to regularize rest, retreat, and renewal as part of pastoral ministry.

In our pastoral care, we can organize support groups for those who are disenfranchised, hurting, and needing safe places to deal with their suffering.

In these and other areas of church life, we can acknowledge the suffering caused by past practice and model approaches that can help us avoid inflicting pain on each other. We will never outgrow our need for the repentance and forgiveness that can restore fellowship among believers when we have hurt one another. But in the power of the Spirit, we can continue to “grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world.”³

Notes

¹ James Newton Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 33.

² In addition to Poling, *The Abuse of Power*, see Barbara Brown Taylor’s *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), for example.

³ From “Vision: Healing and Hope,” the vision statement for Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada; see <http://www.gameo.org/index.asp?content=http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/V586.html>.

About the author

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