

MAY 2005

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MINISTRY

Surviving a 363

BY ANONYMOUS - The author is a United Church minister who wishes to remain anonymous.

Awhile back I was cleaning out the medicine cabinet and came across an old bottle of prescription sleeping pills. But I remembered how those pills were the only way I could sleep nights in what was a nightmarish six-month ordeal. I am a minister who went through a Manual section 363 review.

There were pre-existing tensions in the congregation, and I fell into them. The ministry and personnel committee said it received several complaints about me but wouldn't tell me the specifics of the complaints nor the names of those making them. The Presbytery decided to do a 363 review of my ministry without asking for my opinion of the congregational situation.

That I survived — was cleared, didn't end up under Presbytery supervision and continue in active ministry — has much to do with the grace of God and some presbyters whose common sense prevailed in the end.

I am writing now because I don't want other clergy to go through such an ordeal, and so other church people will know some of the pitfalls of the process.

Section 363c states that Presbytery shall initiate a review “when a question is raised by the Pastoral Charge or by the Presbytery regarding: (i) the effectiveness of Ministry Personnel; (ii) the failure of the Ministry Personnel to maintain the peace and welfare of the church; or (iii) a Ministry Personnel who refuses to recognize the authority of Presbytery.”

At the end of a review, Presbytery can decide to do nothing or to discipline the pastoral charge, require the minister to take further training or counseling, be suspended or fired.

Presbytery and Conference officials told the congregation that a 363 was an open process that would “clear the air.” If anything, the review created much more upheaval in the congregation than was already present. The “anti” group prepared its case to present before the review committee, as did a group of supporters who suddenly emerged, equally as angry.

During the review, I found myself defending my name, reputation and livelihood — hence the sleepless nights. Rumours abounded within the congregation and wider community, to say nothing of Presbytery and Conference. I still hesitate to tell people I went through a 363, even though I was cleared. The process carries a stigma.

As the review progressed, many were uncomfortable in my presence except for some brave, up-front souls. A 12-year-old member telephoned one day. I'd been with his family for the deaths of two grandparents and he'd participated in church events I led.

"Some people at school are saying you're going to be fired because you're not doing your job right," he told me matter-of-factly.

"Has that been your experience of me?" I asked him. "No way!" he replied.

What do you do if the roof falls in? Some advice, based on my experience:

- **Be aware of Section 363. Ministry personnel need to be aware of the vagueness or undefined reasons that can lead to Presbytery conducting a review. When the Presbytery chair telephoned to inform me of the executive's decision to conduct a review of my ministry, I asked for the exact reasons for the review. The chair stammered and then said the pastoral relations chair at my church told the executive there was "great upset" in the congregation. "Great upset" was not defined.**

Ironically, the review found only a small percentage of the congregation complaining about my ministry. This could have been discovered without a review had the Presbytery simply directed the ministry and personnel committee to disclose the names of complainants and the specifics of their complaints.

As well, the Presbytery never asked for my perspective on the congregational situation before it began the 363 review. And if Section 363 is taken at face value, as it was in this case, Presbytery doesn't have to ask.

I believe we need concrete, documented instances of clergy incompetence before moving into a 363 process.

- **Document, document, document: As uneasy situations began early in my tenure, a friend urged me to write down what was happening. I quickly recognized the prayerful aspect of the exercise "purging" myself of hurtful events and leave them at the foot of Christ's cross. But the dated description of events became an invaluable document in defending myself.**

- **Do not "hit back" when people say or do hurtful things. Paul told us not to gossip, use hurtful words, participate in deceitfulness or retaliate when we experience such behaviour. Paul was right. As church leaders we are to model behaviour of the covenant community.**

Reciprocating can often escalate the conflict. And a Presbytery review will, rightfully, find you remiss in not following covenant community behaviour. Remember, holding back from retaliating doesn't mean you're a doormat. You are maintaining your integrity and self-respect.

- **Find yourself a competent adviser or advisers. They may be mature colleagues, laypeople or a counselor with expertise in human behaviour. Without these wise**

folks, I would likely have fallen into many traps of immature retaliatory behaviour.

- **Find a good lawyer. You want the expertise of a labour lawyer to know your legal rights. The review committee has the expertise of the lawyers on staff at the General Council Offices available to them.**

You don't.

I sought out a lawyer prior to a 363 being recommended. To my chagrin, I discovered he'd advised two previous ministers of this congregation. He also told me the ministry and personnel committee had to tell me who the complainants were and the specifics of their complaints. Without such knowledge I couldn't defend myself and that's contrary to natural justice, he said.

"You're dealing with 'ghosts'," he said. "Get them to come out of the shadows and they'll likely disappear. The thing about ghosts is they don't like coming out in the light." But before I could follow his advice, the Presbytery had instituted the review.

- **Count the costs. As a church, we need to consider that 363 reviews are costly on many fronts. A review committee spends countless volunteer hours conducting interviews, consulting with church lawyers, and writing accounts of interviews and their recommendations. There's emotional strain on ministry personnel and their families, plus the financial strain of seeking legal help. For the congregation, ministry and outreach are brought to a halt as people concentrate on the internal review.**

- **Avoid the temptation to sue. My lawyer and I discussed several instances in the course of the review that contravened natural justice. Had not the common sense of a few presbyters prevailed in the outcome, I had grounds to sue. But my lawyer pointed out the catch-22: I'd likely win a lawsuit but I would become known as a troublemaker and no congregation would hire me.**

- **Practise and preach Matthew 18:15-17. To paraphrase: "If a member of the church sins against you — go to him or her directly. But if the person doesn't listen to you, return with one or two others as witnesses. If the person still doesn't listen, tell the church."**

Christ offers us a three-step method of dealing with conflict in the church. Yet too often we skip steps one and two, telling everyone else our grievances except the person with whom we have the problem. The review of my ministry likely could have been avoided if the ministry and personnel committee had followed this simple process. How many other reviews can be avoided by insisting on direct communication? The slander and defamation laws of our country have their roots in texts such as this one from Matthew.

When I first met with the M&P committee of my current congregation, I was clear: "I don't deal with anonymous complaints."

We don't either, they said. And they don't, God bless them.

The words of Joseph to his brothers sustained me during the review: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." (Genesis 50:20a, NRSV). I know I'm stronger for having lived through the nightmare of a 363 review.

After the review, some wondered why I continued ministering. But I entered ministry with eyes open, aware that our church can fail because it is run by humans whose shadow side can prevail. As a minister, I must always try to be aware of my own shadow side. I, too, can fall into traps at times — am tempted to judge others too quickly, give in to a gang mentality, hate because I see in another my own weaknesses or that which I envy or that which simply annoys me.

But I remain in ministry because I believe in Christ's power in the church to transform us into ways of love and justice.

May we deal justly with each other and our ministry personnel. ■