

Some years ago we witnessed an extraordinary campaign of hate and slander launched by disgruntled ex-members against an outstanding mission in South Africa. Salvos of letters, articles, e-mails and phone calls were launched. Websites dedicated to slandering this mission were set up. All manner of vindictive abuse was unleashed against this fine Christian community. I was astounded at the persistence, obsession and unconstructive maliciousness of the antagonists.

Soon, I learned of other ministries overseas, who were also victims of pathological antagonists. Then we became targets of similar campaigns. On my last speaking tour to the USA I was given a book which deals with this phenomenon. For your interest, here is a review of the book which deals with this growing threat to ministries, churches and missions.

A review of: "The Wounded Minister – healing from and preventing personal attacks" by Dr. Guy Greenfield

Every church and ministry has to deal with personality conflicts and intermittent discord. The writer of this book considers that normal. However, what he deals with in *The Wounded Minister* is the "growing phenomenon", "major problem approaching crisis proportions" of "pathological antagonists" and their allies and sympathisers who launch systematic and sustained attacks on the leader of a church or ministry.

Dr. Kenneth Haugk, a clinic psychologist, defines pathological antagonists as "individuals who, on the basis of non-substantive evidence, go out of their way to make insatiable demands, usually attacking the person or performance of others. These attacks are selfish in nature, tearing down rather than building up, and are frequently directed against those in a leadership capacity."

G. Lloyd-Rediger describes these antagonists as "clergy killers", who have as their one major objective, to abuse or hurt the minister to the degree that they will leave the ministry. Rediger notes that this abuse is "increasing in epidemic proportions ... it is a phenomenon that is verified by both research and experience." He identifies clergy killers as "people who intentionally target pastors for serious injury or destruction."

COMMON FEATURES

These researchers have noted certain common features in the modus operandi of pathological antagonists.

1. There is always a set of problems in the church or ministry which serves as a background. The antagonist begins identifying the minister as the cause of the problems. (These problems may include finance, inter-staff conflict, a mailing, a popular staff person resigning, "it does not really matter what the problems are" - in most cases, the minister is blamed).
2. "One person seems to get the criticism train rolling. One person takes it upon himself to begin pointing out these 'serious problems that are hurting our church.' Phone calls are made ... letters are written ... "
3. "Often the person who leads the complaint charge takes several weeks, maybe months, to marshal sympathetic support for his position. Unsuspecting people begin to wonder whether there may be some truth to the complainers accusations."
4. "In many cases the initial accuser enlists a few key leaders to plan some meetings to be held at his or a sympathisers home. These meetings are secret, that is 'invitation only' meetings of people who the accuser believes will agree with his accusations. The primary purpose is to gather support for the eventual attack on their minister ... gathering additional evidence that the minister is to blame for the church's problems. Meticulous notes are usually taken by the accuser or one he designates to do this".
5. "They will try to build a paper trail of accusations with which to charge the minister with inefficiency, poor leadership, lazy work habits, questionable moral behaviour or unChristian attitude. An often-heard complaint is 'oh, it's not so much what he does or says that is so bad, it's the way he does or says it.' The way is seldom explained; it is just assumed to be bad, unhealthy, conflicting, in appropriate, unkind or harsh."
6. "The accusing leader plans his attack very carefully ... he turns on his charm to win the friendship and support" of key people.

7. "The clergy killer knows he must work through recognised authority ... to accomplish his goal of getting rid of the minister. When he knows he has their backing, he will move swiftly, with careful calculation."

8. "The attack has actually been going on for some time, but the clergy killer, when the time is right, gets his plan of attack on the agenda of the official board of his church. He arranges for the minister not to be present."

9. "At this crucial meeting, the clergy killer lays his charges before the assembled body of lay leaders. He will use 'statistics' to bolster his accusations."

10. "When the statistics are interpreted negatively, the finger of blame is pointed at the minister. The bottom line of the charges is very simple: if we get rid of our minister, all of our problems will be solved."

11. "He will probably try to get a special committee appointed (hopefully his friends) to visit the minister in his office as soon as possible to pressure him to resign quietly 'for the sake of the church's unity and future'. By this time ... many ministers have been so harassed and worn out emotionally by all the accusations (by phone calls, letters ... personal visits and rumours) that they will go as quickly and quietly as possible."

12. "It is possible that open conflict will explode ... "

13. "The abused clergy person usually goes into a clinic depression ... his wife and children also feel rejected ... the 'collateral damage' can be quite heavy and devastating."

14. "Abused clergy are frequently abandoned and treated as if they 'now have some dread disease, and their friends, colleagues and superiors keep their distance. Rarely does anyone come to their aid."

Characteristics of Pathological Antagonists

Who are these clergy killers? “These are not normal people, average complainers, critics and typical dissidents who are generally unhappy about life itself ... they are deadly and have a knack for gathering a following of ordinary folk with common complaints and disagreements in the church. They can easily create the illusion that there are hordes of people against the pastor. They are masters at using the tyrannical they in their comments: ‘They are very unhappy about ...’ or the illusive people: ‘people are saying that’ These are verbal instruments in the arsenal that they use to destroy a minister.”

Dr. Greenfield describes pathological antagonists/clergy killers, as persons with “a very mean spirited disposition ... they are destructive. The damage that they want to inflict is intentional and deliberate. They are not out simply to disagree ... they want to inflict pain and damage persons. ... clergy killers are determined. They are headstrong and will stop at nothing. They may pause for a time, change strategies, even go underground to reconnoitre, but they will come back with a vengeance to continue the intimidation, networking and breaking all rules of decency to accomplish their destructive objectives. For them, their plans have priority over all other programmes of the church. These persons are deceitful ... masters of manipulation, camouflage, misrepresentation and accusing others of their own atrocious deeds ... experts at twisting facts. ... maybe mentally disordered, but they do not yield to patience or love, nor do they honour human decency. Apparently clergy killers carry around a lot of internal pain, confusion, anger, and even rage. Spiritual leaders ... become available scapegoats for this pain and confusion, which is unidentified and untreated.”

“Clergy killers are masters of intimidation, using it to violate the rules of decency and caring that most Christians try to follow. Intimidation is a powerful weapon ... therefore, ministers and their supporters are easily intimidated by these persuasive and charming religious assailants. Clergy killers are experts of disguise when they see it would be to their advantage. They are able to present themselves as pious, devout and spiritual church members, who are doing their destructive work ‘for the good of the church to advance God’s Kingdom.’ They can convince naïve church members that they are raising legitimate issues. These religious monsters often hide among their allies of opportunity ... they openly intimidate any opposition by making it clear that they will fight dirty and use any tactic to accomplish their goals. Gentle and peace-at-any-price church members are quickly sidelined by such threats, leaving ministers and those who support them to cope with the problem the best way they can.”

“Clinically speaking, ... they may possess distinct personality disorders ... anti-social, borderline paranoid, narcissistic ... others have learnt to throw tantrums to get their selfish ways. They’ve learnt how to distract, confuse, lie and seduce to do harm to the vulnerable.”

“Clergy killers wound or destroy either by direct attacks or by inciting others to inflict the wounds. Sometimes they induce victims to self-destruct, by harassing them to the point of frustration and anger. ... it only takes one or two in the church to create havoc and bedlam. Because these people live in denial as to their true nature, they would not see themselves in this chapter, even if they were to read it. Clergy killers have surrounded and insulated themselves with a whole array of defense mechanisms and justifications for their actions. They firmly believe that what they are doing in harming and terminating a minister is the right thing to do. For them, it is the will of God. Nevertheless, they are sick and mean people.”

What is a Pathological Antagonist?

A pathological antagonist is an intransigent person of antagonistic disposition.

1. “The arguments of a pathological antagonist are usually found in little or terribly misrepresented evidence ... quibbling over petty details, offering strong proof of irrelevant points ... exaggerating the position of one’s opponent ... making an accusation that cannot be disproved and then claiming that this makes it true ... outright lying or falsification. An antagonist, in his attempt to make the kill, will take certain facts and so twist them that they are blatantly false when presented. In time he convinces himself that his twisted facts are true.”
2. Pathological antagonists are “hyper-sensitive to any word or action, even trivial oversights, so that he takes these things as a personal attack and responds aggressively.”
3. “The pathological antagonist is never satisfied. His demands are insatiable. No amount of accommodation on the ministers part will ever suffice. Attempts at appeasement will not calm him down, but will encourage him to make more demands. ... he is persistent and unstoppable.”
4. “The pathological antagonist will lead a campaign of attack on the minister ... not trying to give constructive criticism ... his goal is nothing short of control, no matter what it may cost the minister or the church. The antagonist is so full of rage that he feels compelled to attack the enemy (the minister) until he is destroyed (terminated and eliminated from the scene).”
5. “This person probably has a God problem. He feels some deep-seated anger towards God for some reason out of his past experiences. Because it is difficult to show anger directly towards God, the pathological antagonist chooses the minister, the ‘man of God’, as his target.

Sometimes this anger is guilt-driven (possibly due to some hidden sin) ... a smokescreen to cover his own moral indiscretions.”

6. “The attacking behaviour of a pathological antagonist is selfish in nature ... this person is rarely interested in authentic spiritual goals. If one rationale no longer works to his advantage, he will devise another ... his stated reasons for opposition are a ruse for his own hidden agenda. What he really wants is power, control, status and authority.”

7. “The attacks ... are for destruction rather than construction. The antagonists’ actions divide the church; they do not pull the people together.”

Dr. Greenfield distinguishes between four types of pathological antagonists.

Hard-core Antagonists

“Seriously disturbed people ... out of touch with reality ... paranoid ... which is not easy to detect ... can appear normal either some or most of the time ... incredible persistence and an extreme desire to make trouble, even enjoying their sadistic inclinations. One can easily spot one of these individuals by the smirk often seen on his face, especially noticeable after he makes a cynical or snide remark ... hard-core antagonists will go to any length and expense to wreck havoc on their targets ... they are fighting a Jihad, a holy war, and the minister is the enemy. They believe they are doing God a favour. Their inner rage is baptised with the aura of holy zeal. Without a doubt, the hard-core antagonist is slippery and dangerous. He cannot be reasoned with. The Apostle Paul may have had this kind of people in mind when he warned the Ephesian elders about ‘savage wolves’ infiltrating the congregation and ‘not sparing the flock’ (Acts 20:28-29).”

Major Antagonists

Not as severely disturbed. “If the hard-core antagonist cannot be reasoned with because of emotional instability, the major antagonist refuses to be reasoned with. Reason is within his capacity, but he knows that if he uses it, he may be defeated or proved wrong. So, to protect his position, he simply refuses to be reasonable and his demands are insatiable. This individual probably has a character or personality disorder, seen in the heavy load of anger he carries about ... personality problems ... deep-seated. A major antagonist does not want to change, since change is threatening to him. He has built a defensive wall around himself, labelled ‘I am right, what I’m doing is right’.”

Moderate Antagonists

Lack the self-starting quality of the first two types ... the moderate antagonist initiates trouble only if the opportunity presents itself – however, he will quickly follow a hard-core or a major antagonist in causing trouble – but he lacks the perseverance of the other two. He has personality problems, but they are not as severe as those of the hard-core or the major types.

Well-intentioned Dragons

They have goals which may “allegedly be in the best interests of the church, but their methods and attitudes are still those of a dragon, doing more harm than good, undermining the ministry of the church without intending to do so.”

Dr. Greenfield notes that while all of the above four types are “malevolent in both intent and effect.. I’m distinguishing here somewhat between degrees of meanness.”

Dr. Greenfield also clearly distinguishes between persistent activists who are devoted to a worthy cause, for example – the Pro-Life / Anti-abortion crusade. Activists are “issue orientated, not person centered as the pathological antagonists are.”

“Pathological antagonists possess an insatiable desire to drag problems out interminably, eventually wearing down the target of opposition. Pathological antagonists precipitate conflict that is unhealthy and destructive.”

Pathological antagonists are “negative and critical ... legalistic and intransigent ... quick to point out other’s faults and shortcomings ... well-known for its judgmental attitude ... very picky about trivial details ... one long story of unhappiness ...”

Dr. Greenfield writes: “Over the years I have noticed that persons who tended to be failures in their chosen careers were inclined to come into the church and take key leadership roles while exercising a strong controlling modus operandi ... although they were failures outside the church, they could be somewhat important in the church.”

Allies of Pathological Antagonists

“A pathological antagonist tends to attract certain followers. Without them, the antagonist’s efforts would fizzle. He usually does not have the courage to go it alone. He needs followers to bolster his campaign against the minister ... calculating in his enlistment of a small band of followers. Each had a personal axe to grind ... the passive nature of other church leaders simply allowed this to happen.”

The Wounded Minister also notes that the greatest ally of pathological antagonists, and the greatest enemy of spiritual leaders, are the passive.

He quotes Cicero: “There are two kinds of injustice: the first is found in those who do an injury, the second in those who fail to protect another from injury when they can.”

Those who do an injury are motivated either by meanness or psychopathy. Those who stand by and allow it to happen are motivated either by cowardice or indifference.

Edmund Burke noted: “All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.”

Those who are intimidated by powerful and persuasive antagonists enable clergy abuse. The antagonists see this passivity as an open invitation to continue their assaults and they become even more bloodthirsty.

It is also noted that, while the targets of the antagonist are frequently too busy to do their homework and respond to the vast amount of accusations, the pathological antagonists always have an excessive amount of free time. “The antagonist have tended to be retired people ... with a lot of free time on their hands ..., the antagonists had plenty of time to plan their strategy, organise their supporters, hold secret meetings with their friends and spend numerous hours telephoning people to get the vote out for key meetings.”

When the minister can come up with the documentation and the facts to refute any number of the accusations thrown at him, the antagonist simply changes the subject and tries another attack. There are normally no apologies or any acknowledgement of the damage they have

done.

“This reminds me of the typical hit and run driver who never pays for his crime. Unlike the driver, however, the antagonist enjoys doing this sort of thing.”

Biblical Precedents

The classical Biblical precedent is Judas Iscariot. Judas was the treasurer of the disciples, obviously a trusted person. “Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot.” Luke 22:3. It is not incidental that the basic meaning of Satan is “accuser”, which is the primary role of an antagonist.

The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 10-13 of: “False apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” ; “Super apostles” who have a “different spirit” and are embroiling the church in “quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit and disorder.” The Apostle Paul writes that his ministry had been for “building up and not for tearing down.” Paul rebukes the Corinthian Christians for not having defended him in the face of these antagonists.

Another Biblical example is Diotrephes written about in John’s third letter. John characterised this antagonist as one “who liked to put himself first” and “does not acknowledge our authority.” Diotrephes was “spreading false charges against us.”

John concludes with this appeal: “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.”

Collateral Damage to the Church

The underhand tactics of pathological antagonists are “a lot like throwing a hand grenade ... it may wound or kill the minister, but a lot of other people and other aspects of the church’s ministry will be damaged or destroyed as well. A sad note about this is that pathological antagonists don’t really care what damage they do.”

Those involved in angry, grumpy, critical and disgruntled gossip sessions and those trying to

placate them will naturally have little time left for serious spiritual work. “A major casualty of minister abuse is the church’s evangelistic outreach.” But “antagonists are always right. Loss of members, contributions and spiritual fervour is for the self-appointed judges of the ministry, always the ministers fault.”

“Churches that abuse their ministers are not growing churches. They either stagnate or eventually die, if not in numbers, at least in spirit.”

Wounded ministers observes that “when a church is more concerned with its internal operations ... than it is with ministry, it becomes vulnerable ... churches that are more committed to winning new converts and discipling them in the faith ... will be less vulnerable to Satan’s attacks. Outreach, evangelism, ministry and missions will keep a congregation on its knees in prayer. Satan can more easily invade a church that is consumed with secondary matters.”

The Curse of Appeasement

“When the good, prayerful, dedicated, loving lay leaders are afraid of conflict in the church and have no stomach for challenging” pathological antagonists, they “will choose a philosophy of appeasement rather than reasonable confrontation ...” However, when targets plead for help to those not involved in the campaign of hate, they are normally “met with disbelief that there were any evil intentions to get rid of the minister.”

This naivete fuels and encourages the pathological antagonist to press on with his obsessive campaign.

Scriptural Solutions

Dr. Greenfield writes: “The Bible wisely sets limits on the criticism of a minister. Paul directed Timothy in the churches under his charge: ‘never accept any accusation against an elder, except on the evidence of two or three witness. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest also may stand in fear.’” 1 Timothy 5:19-20. Legitimate accusations must be supported by two or three witnesses, and must be clearly recognised as sinful behaviour by the church. If these criteria are not met, Paul implies that the accuser must be rebuked for violating Scriptural standards.”

“A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrong doing in connection

with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained. If a malicious witness comes forward to accuse someone of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord ... the judges shall make a thorough enquiry. If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as a false witness had meant to do the other. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. The rest shall hear and be afraid.” Deuteronomy 19:15-20

Extracts from *The Wounded Minister – healing from and preventing personal attacks* by Dr. Guy Greenfield, published by Baker, 2002

“But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.” Titus 3:9-11

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