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A RESPONSE TO ANGER: IT'S HARD TO PRAY TO HEAVEN WHEN YOU'RE MAD AS HELL

by C. Roy Woodruff, Ph.D.

Anger is the emotion that is generally most apparent when we try to strike back at the curve balls of life. It is the most difficult emotion to manage since it can be either a time bomb waiting to explode inside the self or a missile directed toward others. Listening to stories from forcibly terminated clergy and their spouses at MTM Wellness Retreats has reinforced my awareness that the response of anger is often both appropriate and dangerous. The challenge is to recognize the appropriate use of anger while minimizing the destructive potential of unmanaged anger that can damage the self and others.

Many of us, self included, grew up in a church and/or family environment which disallowed expressions of anger as unchristian and unacceptable. To express anger was considered a sinful act. Such a position, however, is contrary to scriptural teaching throughout both the Old and New Testaments. The book of Habakkuk, obscure though it may be, is a back and forth confrontation between an angry man and a defensive sounding God. While God responds to the angry complaints he does not chastise the man for his anger. The better known character of Job openly expresses his anger at the undeserved catastrophe of his life, much to the displeasure of his friends, but God chastises his friends and acknowledges Job's integrity. Proverbs cautions against a quick temper but not against anger appropriately expressed, *i.e. He who is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly (14:29)*. Ecclesiastes adds to this wisdom by stating, *Be not quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools (7:9)*. A classic New Testament verse on anger says *Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger (Eph. 4:26)*. The clear instruction is that it's possible to be angry and not sin as long as we resolve our anger and do not hold onto it by internalizing it, becoming depressed, or bearing a grudge.

Holding onto our anger blocks access to our spiritual center, preventing healing. The key resources of faith, such as prayer and forgiveness, become unavailable to us when we need them most. Thus, the title of this article: *A Response to Anger: It's Hard to Pray to Heaven When You're Mad as Hell!* Essentially, anger is a response to

a perceived threat. We need to understand what the threat is and from where it is coming. For one who is forcibly terminated, this would seem obvious. The threat is the loss of a job and is embodied in those who are leading the charge, whether it's an infamous "gang of three" or the congregation as a whole. True, but not so fast. There are deeper threats which are internally triggered by fear to which our anger can blind us. These threats will be there long after the job and the people involved are gone. In *The Rage Within: Anger in Modern Life*, Willard Gaylin, MD, helps us understand the complex core of anger and the internal dynamics that can fuel our anger long after the sun goes down. Let's look at three.

BETRAYAL – This dynamic is set up by a complete loss of trust in those to whom we have looked to for affirmation and support. The usual response is outrage, connecting at a deep level with primal fears of abandonment and increased by any past experiences in childhood or later stages of life. Response to betrayal can include a sense of worthlessness, rejection, powerlessness, and deception. One may become angry with themselves for having participated in the deception and not recognizing or attending to the signals of deteriorating relationships. Gaylin writes, "Betrayal is capable of generating the most direct and explosive outpouring of anger." Without adequate management, this explosive anger can be misdirected at one's spouse, children,

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A RESPONSE TO ANGER

and friends. It is the “kick the dog” syndrome, except it usually isn’t the dog that gets kicked.

HUMILIATION – Being a minister in a religious community is a public and often high profile position. It can be accompanied by a sense of pride in oneself and noted approval by others. Losing that status through forced termination can contribute to public humiliation. Gaylin calls public humiliation “the ultimate degradation.” In Asian cultures, it is called “losing face” and is a profoundly distressing experience that threatens one’s integrity, provoking deep anger. In my observation, in certain cases, it can be compounded by guilt and shame. Guilt may be felt when one realizes that his/her action, or inaction, contributed to this loss. Shame is a deeper and more enduring dynamic that touches the core of the soul, taking longer for the restoration of the self but also hoping for personal renewal and growth when explored.

GRIEF – I would say that what may be felt as anger is often grief. A pastor in distress over his job once said to me, “I’m beginning to see that what I thought was just anger is basically grief over what has been lost and cannot be regained as it was.” The bad news is that grief can be one of the most deep and painful emotions. The good news is that given time and space, grief does lessen and heal. Anger is clearly a part of the grief equation, but it can fade when we reframe the loss to grief.

There are other dynamics involved in anger. The above three, however, are enough to let us know that while anger is a normal

and healthy response to a threatening situation, anger that takes root in our personality garden, like an invasive species, will eventually destroy the health giving, spirit nurturing, and relationship enhancing “species” that are there as part of our inner order ordained by our Creator God. We need to listen to scripture when it says that normal, justified anger is appropriate as a “first responder” emotion to injustice, insensitivity, or unfairness in our life experience, but that we need to manage the emotion and move beyond it. While anger can initially help us to regain some sense of power, protect our rightful interests, and motivate us to useful action, unresolved anger contaminates our being and becomes a self-destructive rage that limits or eliminates our prayer life. It can cancel our ability to use the gift of forgiveness that can free us and enrich the relationships that matter. Remember Ecclesiastes: *Anger lodges in the bosom of fools!*

Being “mad as hell” is more than a euphemism. It is a representation of a constricted spiritual state of being that can bring temporary release but long-term deterioration in the physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions of our lives. We need, therefore, to learn from the emotion, share it responsibly with selected others, let it go, renew our spiritual center, and move on with our lives in God’s grace.

Dr. C. Roy Woodruff is a member of the MTM Board of Trustees. Before retiring, he served as the Executive Director of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors.

MEET OUR NEW TRUSTEES

PATRICIA JONES

- Born in Algood, Tennessee
- Educated at George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, TN and Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
- Spent four years in the U.S. Navy
- Worked several years at the Southern Baptist International Mission Board
- Worked with computer systems and data security with the Virginia State Police, SEC Computer Company/Life Insurance Company of Virginia and International Information Systems Security Certification Consortium
- Currently volunteers at First Baptist Church in Richmond and the Southern Baptist International Mission Board



- Member, Spiritual Directors International
- Served as pastor of worship and administration at the Peace Reformed Church in Middleville, MI
- Founding pastor of Fourth Corner Community Church in Bellingham, WA

REV. CONNIE “ROBIN” LAMBERT

- Educated at Chaminade University in Hawaii, Eden Seminary in St. Louis, and Birmingham-Southern College
- Ordained to ministry by the Disciples of Christ Church
- Served as associate pastor and pastor of churches in Alabama, Missouri, Hawaii, and Uruguay
- Supply minister for churches within three denominations and four states since 2005
- Involved in a number of community activities such as travel talks and community programming; active in the community theatre; active on numerous boards and service agencies; and hosts a local television program



REV. G. DAVID KORSEN

- Educated at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA
- Ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Reformed Church in America
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Deep Scars

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slowly from the trauma of church conflict/forced termination for three reasons:

1. The minister's spouse seldom has any one to talk with except his/her clergy spouse who is the one person they are trying to protect. As a result the spouse is likely to internalize his/her feelings. Ministers' spouses who have their own career often emerge healthier because they have a support system other than the church.
2. The spouse experiences a "double whammy." It is one thing to be rejected and vilified yourself, but it is another thing to see someone you love being treated unjustly. They know the long hours, the depth of agony, and commitment involved in which their clergy spouse carried out his/her pastoral ministry. The deep feeling of betrayal, coupled with the feelings of injustice and helplessness, becomes a heavy burden to carry, especially when suffering alone and in silence.
3. Another factor is the minister's spouse's need to help nurture their clergy spouse. Because of the overwhelming injustice done to someone they love, they may put their own healing on hold while they reach out in love and compassion to their clergy spouse. Later, after the clergy spouse begins to heal, they may discover they are still suffering because their anger is buried deep within.

It is critical that both clergy and clergy spouses have a therapist to walk with them through the lonely and difficult times. Every clergy and spouse needs friends outside the church with whom they are free to openly talk. Friends can provide an atmosphere of genuine fellowship and acceptance. A therapist can help transform the trauma into an experience of growth. Friends, therapists, and Wellness Retreats like those sponsored by MTM can be powerful spiritual resources. Traumatic experiences like forced termination have the potential to destroy individuals and marriages. Traumatic experiences shared with God and others can open the door to healing and preparation for future experiences in life and ministry.

UTAH PASTOR ELECTED CHAIR OF THE MTM BOARD OF TRUSTEES



Dr. Michael Chittum was elected chair of the MTM Board of Trustees. A veteran member of the board, Michael is currently serving as Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church of Salt Lake City, Utah, which is affiliated with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. Previously, Michael was the minister of Covenant Congregational Church at Piedmont College

in Demorest, Georgia, and the senior minister of the Plymouth Congregational Church in Wichita, Kansas. Before serving Congregational churches, Michael served Baptist churches in Alabama, Virginia, and Kentucky.

Michael received a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Tennessee, and the Master of Divinity and Doctor of Philosophy degrees from The Southern Baptist Theological

Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Michael and his wife, Vicki, have two adult sons.

Michael remarked that "One of the popular television quiz shows allows the contestant to use a 'lifeline' to help them answer a question when they are stuck. MTM has been a 'lifeline' for hundreds of ministers as they faced the pain of forced termination. MTM was certainly a lifeline for me when a spokesperson of a small group within a former church said, 'You need to resign. When a team has a losing season, the coach is fired.' Through MTM's Wellness Retreat, I gained perspective on what was happening to me, my calling as a minister, my career, and how to deal with the stress on me and my family. More than that, I was able to talk with other ministers who had gone through similar experiences and who were able to provide emotional support for me. I am excited to serve as chair of the board and help MTM achieve its goal of ministering to clergy who are facing painful times."

Other officers include: Dr. Roberta Damon, vice-chair; Ms. Greta Morris, secretary; Ms. Patricia Jones, vice-secretary; and Dr. Charles Chandler, treasurer.

MTM Mission Statement

The MTM Foundation seeks to be advocates for clergy and their families in all faith groups who are experiencing personal or professional crisis due to deteriorating employment or congregation-clergy relationships.

Coming soon:

HEALTHY TRANSITIONS

Wellness Retreats for Ministers and Spouses

December 7-11, 2009

*Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond
Richmond, Virginia*

January 11-15, 2010

*Carson-Newman College
Jefferson City, Tennessee*

*Co-sponsored by
Norton Institute for Congregational Health at
Carson-Newman College*

April 12-16, 2010

*Green Lake Conference Center
Green Lake, Wisconsin*

Co-sponsored by Green Lake Conference Center

Other retreats are in the planning process

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FORCED TERMINATION LEAVES DEEP SCARS ON MINISTERS' SPOUSES

by Charles H. Chandler, D. Min., Executive Director

During church conflict and forced terminations, ministers' spouses usually experience more pain, have more anger, and recover from the trauma more slowly than the minister. After fifteen years of working with ministers and their families, I have seen the pain and the traumatizing effect too many times. It is not unusual for the minister or the minister's spouse, in particular, to find it difficult to trust church leaders again.



DR. CHANDLER A minister's spouse sobbed as she recounted the horror of her husband being forced from his church ministry position. He received a phone call from the chair of the church staff relations committee telling him that the committee wished to meet with him that same night. They told him that he was awful at most everything he did, and they strongly suggested he begin looking for a new position, though they admitted that he was a person of outstanding character and high moral standards. The minister's wife stated, "We were very upset by all that took place so quickly. For many nights we cried and could not sleep." After returning from a week of much needed vacation, the staff relations committee chair informed her husband that they wanted him gone within a month.

The depth of pain can be seen in a letter the above spouse wrote a few weeks later. "I could barely attend church because I felt everyone was talking behind our backs. I would become physically sick on Sunday mornings and slip into the sanctuary just before worship began and hurriedly depart once it was over. I found it almost impossible to talk with anyone in the church because I was so hurt. I was there only to support my husband. He had no one to go to and felt no support for his ministry. It struck me that he was like Daniel in

the lion's den. It is sad when the church is unwilling to comfort its own."

The spouse further wrote, "My husband read his letter of resignation on the Sunday after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. Two weeks later he had to leave after 25 years of ministry. Imagine what it must have felt like for my husband. I have watched him grieve his loss. And while he still cares for the people he served for 25 years, I have distanced myself from them. It hurts too much to face them."

A military officer wrote concerning the forced termination of his clergy spouse, "It was one of the most difficult, trying, hurtful, and agonizing events of our marriage. It was difficult to stand by and not be able to help, even though my spouse had not done anything wrong. I was silenced by words and actions of both the lay leaders of the church and the Bishop who came to 'mediate' on behalf of my spouse. I was told that I could attend the meeting but was not allowed to provide input, question, or participate in the discussions."

He further wrote, "After the session, when I questioned the Bishop about violations of my spouse's contract, our civil rights and personal safety, and stated that I thought we should seek the advice of an attorney, we were told by the Bishop, that he had no doubts that we had adequate grounds for a law suit. 'If you do, however, you will be done in this denomination.'"

Concerning his feeling during this experience, the minister's spouse wrote, "not only did we feel the pain of a forced termination by a very few vocal members of the church, we also felt abandoned by the person who was supposed to be an advocate and who had the power, and authority, to say STOP, what you are doing is wrong and will not be tolerated in this church. It was so difficult to explain to our children that they had to leave their school, friends, and activities even though we had no place to go."

I have observed that minister's spouses experience more pain and anger, and recover more

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Offering CARE for Caregivers

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