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Holy terror

Candis McLean - December 26, 2005

Stop church abuse" read one. "Communicate, not excommunicate," another. A third: "Bullies are not Christ-like." Those were the messages three congregants carried on picket signs last April as they marched in front of the South Calgary Community Church, a Baptist church in the middle-class neighbourhood of Cedarbrae in Calgary's southwest.

Baptist churches don't often end up the subject of protest marches--especially from their own flock. But in this case, the parishioners were protesting something that might be almost as uncommon: the excommunication of two of their members, Barry and Jennifer Pendergast. The Calgary couple had not only been excommunicated once, but twice--in both cases over disagreements with the pastor. But as the Pendergasts fought the orders--through legal action and rallying their fellow congregants--they made a startling discovery: their situation was far from unique. The problem of "church abuse"--be it pastors abusing congregants or congregants abusing pastors--is more widespread than they had imagined. So much so, that it inspired the Pendergasts to set up a website, bleatinglambs.org, which has attracted the attention and stories of thousands of other Christians across North America who have faced the same challenges: being alienated from their faith and their congregations after finding themselves the unwitting victims of church abuse. And the problem, experts say, is only getting worse.

Today, Jennifer Pendergast is just starting to recover from what she says was one of the most painful experiences of her life--worse, she says, than the grief and anguish she felt after losing her son in a car accident. "When we lost Simon, our friends rallied around us," she says. "This time, people didn't do that. The church wasn't there to help us." She has suffered psychological trauma that forced her to undergo thousands of dollars worth of therapy. Jennifer says she was hospitalized twice for the physical effects of anxiety. "I've never felt so low and alone," she says. "Emotional and spiritual abuse is almost as bad as sexual abuse; the feeling of isolation makes you feel dirty, soiled."

All of it began over a seemingly minor conflict over who would teach the church's marriage counselling course. In August 2003, after eight years of heading up the congregation's children's nursery, Jennifer decided to spend more time working with couples facing marriage problems. She and her husband Barry, a Calgary architect, had for years been counselling couples from the congregation in their home and running the church's Alpha

Marriage Course. The couple, who had spent nine years in the South Calgary Church, and headed up several of the church's outreach programs, winning an award in 2003 for starting the most new ministries, decided they wanted to take their counselling services into the community. They would begin holding sessions in a local community centre, and reaching out to non-congregants, using Christian teachings to help fix troubled marriages.

Shortly afterward, Barton Wallace, the wife of SCCC pastor Jim Wallace, approached the Pendergasts. She, too, had planned to run a similar marriage counselling program, an extension of her current activities working with young, newlywed couples. The Pendergasts, calculating that two almost identical marital counselling courses in one neighbourhood would be stretching things too thinly, and not wanting to compete with the pastor's wife, dropped their plans.

But that's not what Pastor Wallace wanted, they allege. After they informed him of their decision not to pursue the ministry, the pastor ordered them to proceed anyway. The demands were so stern, they say, that they recoiled, refusing to be bullied by Wallace. "We were told that if we didn't do this ministry area, then we would not be allowed to serve in the ministry area again," says Jennifer. Shortly afterward, she says, "we received a letter and they said they were taking us out of all ministry areas." Within days, the locks on the church were changed, and the Pendergasts' keys no longer worked.

By September, just a month after they had been looking forward to starting a new marriage counselling ministry, the Pendergasts were informed they were being excommunicated from South Calgary Church. They were told it was for "promotion of disunity, gossip, creation of discord and dissension, and lack of submission to duly-constituted authority." The decision was announced in church before the entire congregation.

Sean Zimmer, a member of the SCCC, recalls being stunned that two longtime, devoted members of the church were being booted out. He, like many congregants, assumed that the two had done something terribly sinful. "There was no explanation given, and when I sought an explanation, I didn't get one," Zimmer says. "I knew whatever they had done must have been as bad as murder. Yet if I had been asked, 'Could you point to an example in the church of how a Christian should live?' I would have said, 'Barry and Jenny.' They were always there working, my kids loved them, their marriage course was phenomenal, and I learned most from watching their own caring relationship. I thought, 'If they can be kicked out, I'm toast.'" Six months later, alienated by what happened to the Pendergasts, and disappointed in the SCCC's leadership, Zimmer did, in fact, quit the church. He has not been back to it--or any church--since.

The Pendergasts wondered if they should just give up and find another church, but worried that not trying to change things would only ensure that the same thing would happen again to someone else. "When we started to find out that a lot of people had been hurt, too," says Barry, "we thought, 'We gotta stick around.'"

They hired a lawyer, and in November, he served the church elders with a writ alleging that the church had revoked the Pendergasts' membership without any fair process and requesting a reinstatement. The elders agreed to sit down with the Pendergasts before a Christian mediator, who found that the couple had indeed been treated unfairly and ruled that the church should work towards reconciliation and restoration of the couple's membership in the church. In March, the Pendergasts and church officials signed an agreement acknowledging that officials had not observed certain Biblical and legal responsibilities of fairness and natural justice, while recognizing that the Pendergasts could have behaved more in accordance with their Biblical and membership responsibilities. The Pendergasts requested the elders pay for the $20,000 in legal fees the couple incurred fighting their excommunication. The elders refused on the grounds that they had their own legal bill of $40,000 to worry about. The size of that bill, says Barry, "tells you something about how much time and effort they had spent" trying to keep him and his wife out of the church.

It wasn't long before the situation deteriorated. On the first day of spring, 2004, the Pendergasts returned to the church to what they say was "a very cool reception." Jennifer, once the head of the preschool, was told she was no longer allowed to visit the nursery. Over the next few months, says Barry, they were "harassed and stalked" by church elders, who tailed them whenever they were in the church. "I'm protecting the flock," replied one elder, when challenged by Barry. "Many [congregants] were shunning us," Jennifer says. Adds Barry: "They do all the things that a cult does."

And they discovered they weren't alone. Verdeen Krahn, a 15-year member of the church, had developed serious psychological stress after clashing with Wallace and being stripped of her responsibilities running Ladies' Time Out, a weekday ministry for women. Wallace accused Krahn of being "power hungry," she alleges. The trauma of being chastised by her own church leader, she says, forced her into mental care, for the first time in her life, at a nearby hospital. "[M]y pain and hurt and sense of betrayal with SCCC dominated a lot of my sessions," she wrote in a letter to the Pendergasts.

Jim Grady, formerly the SCCC's youth pastor, had left the church a few years earlier, after feeling undermined and harassed by officials who made him feel as though he had done something horribly wrong--but he swears they never made it clear what. "I was afraid to go to the bathroom by myself for fear they would claim I had raped someone," Grady says. "They demanded that I ask forgiveness of everyone I had offended in the church, but I didn't know what the heck I had done. [Pastor] Jim would say things like, 'Some of the young people are losing confidence in your leadership.' When I would ask him which young people he was referring to, he said that he could not tell me. It was all done by innuendo to create fear . . . They could not have been more cruel." Several years later, Grady learned from a youth pastor at another church--who signed a sworn statement affirming it--that Barton Wallace, the pastor's wife, had told her she wanted to take the job of youth pastor for herself. In 2004, Grady wanted the church to convene an inquiry into his case. "There should be systems in place requiring more accountability and openness with the congregation," he says. The request

was denied.

In October 2004, feeling like strangers in the church they once loved, the Pendergasts received a letter from the elders, accusing them of several incidents that "were not in keeping with the conditions for membership you agreed to follow" when their membership was reinstated. Among the charges: "speaking harsh words to greeters"; "Jennifer attempts to participate in Preschool Sunday School, having been asked previously 2 times to not participate"; "Jennifer interacts in an intimidating manner with a member who was taking registrations at Ladies Time Out"; and several points at which Barry was overheard discussing with non-members his complaint against the church. By November, the elders once again announced that they were excommunicating the Pendergasts from the church.

Ron Fraser estimates that he performs at least three or four substantive mediations between church leaders and congregants every year. But that's just a fraction of the number the president of the Calgary-based Alberta Bible College is asked to mediate. Moreover, he says, incidents of church abuse are multiplying, affecting congregations everywhere; nor is it a problem that discriminates by denomination. Last November, a group of United Church ministers announced plans to join the Canadian Auto Workers union, citing intolerable working conditions, caused by abuse by congregants including, among other things, harassment. Writing in the October 2004 edition of *The Observer*, the United Church of Canada's official magazine, Rev. Peter Short suggested that "60 per cent of ministers are experiencing high levels of conflict with their congregations."

On the other side, says Fraser, "and by far the more devastating to the cause of Christ," are the congregants abused by church leaders. Many ministers do it, Fraser says, for the gratification of ego. "They can command people like little tin gods," he says. "It's a very hard thing to get at, hidden in darkness--no one wants to talk about it, until someone is willing to risk the wrath of the perpetrator." Banishing congregants isn't the normal result--Fraser says he's heard of only four incidents like that in his lifetime. Usually, it's worse: the withdrawing of fellowship or driving congregants away manipulatively and secretively.

Experts say that abuse ripples through a congregation in much the same way that it does through an afflicted family: it is always present, like a pall. There is "a more or less constant undercurrent of anxiety over who is really loyal, who is 'in' and who is 'out,'" writes Ronald Enroth, in his book *Churches That Abuse*. "This [atmosphere of anxiety] may be given an elegant Biblical or psychological explanation. It sounds so right, but in time it feels so bad."

Abuse often goes hand in hand with what is too often an atmosphere of secrecy that exists in many churches, says Cara Beed, an Australian sociologist and author of *Cultures of Secrecy and Abuse: A Paradox for Churches*. Abusers cultivate concealment--closed-door meetings, unspoken and unanswerable decrees--as a means of isolating victims and preventing the truth from becoming widely known. Victims, meanwhile, find themselves trapped by fear and discomfort, often unsure of their rights and

unsure of their own legitimacy. Forced to hide the abuse, sometimes in shame, they become further isolated and vulnerable. "The church has no call for secrecy; it has no need for power to corrupt, or allow abuse to flourish," says Beed. "As George MacDonald, the nineteenth-century Scottish novelist wrote: 'It is only righteousness that has a right to secrecy, and does not want it; evil has no right to secrecy, alone intensely desires it, and rages at being foiled of it.'"

Responding as the Pendergasts did--by standing up to the abuse and forcing it into the open--is the most effective way of ending it, Beed says. "Whistle-blowers," like the Pendergasts, are part of the "new culture of awareness," exposing abuse in all facets of society. "In our contemporary scenes, it is apparent that the abuse present in the churches over the last fifty to one hundred years, has at last started to reach the light of day," Beed says. But church abuse itself, she adds, goes back a long way: the first case being the abuse of Jesus himself by religious leaders who would not tolerate his outspokenness and dissent from their official teachings.

In August, Pastor Jim Wallace announced that he was resigning from the South Calgary Christian Church. His official reason: he was going to care for his parents in Kentucky. But his letter of resignation to congregants seemed defensive enough to suggest that there might have been other considerations. "There is no problem," he wrote to congregants. "Nothing is wrong. This decision is not related to anything inside or outside of the church. I was not asked to resign. It is strictly personal."

While Wallace declined to be interviewed for this story, SCCC elder Clark Grue insists that any problems congregants had at the church weren't Wallace's doing. "Pastor Wallace is a man of integrity and high moral standing," Grue says. "I've been at the church seven years and with the board of elders two years; I don't see an issue with leadership. Neither the pastor nor his wife is a problem. The elders have been unanimous on all decisions."

The Pendergasts claim that the church elders themselves were intensely loyal to Wallace, and not nearly open-minded enough to their concerns or those of other congregants. Abusers, notes Fraser, are often charismatic and highly imposing figures: smooth-talking, persuasive, complex, intelligent and charming. "They have the ability to sell people things that are designed to help the person selling rather than the consumer," Fraser says.

Grue maintains that while he "cannot get into particulars" about what happened with the Pendergasts, "when you get any membership together, there are decisions that must be made. The elders went through many processes, including the use of an outside mediator, until we got to the point where we had to remove them. I don't know how we could have been more truthful or honest. It is sad, but we hope and pray that both sides move along and grow with God."

The Pendergasts are adamant that their friction with Wallace and the elders had nothing to do with any fundamental disagreements over theology or church policy, but was simply a case of their refusing to submit to Wallace's

brazen authority. Still, they have moved on and are preparing to celebrate Christmas at another church a little further from their house, but one, they say, where they feel much more at home. The pastor there, says Jennifer, has "a servant's heart"--eager to help congregants, not insist upon their deference.

In the meantime, the couple has been working hard to raise awareness and find solutions to the problem of church abuse. In addition to the hundreds of people they meet over their website, they helped to organize a seminar on Oct. 22 at Alberta Bible College called "Beyond Spiritual Abuse." Raising the profile of the church crisis is not only an important way of getting people to recognize it, says Jennifer; the seminar was gratifying for victims of abuse to realize there were others out there suffering as they did. "It was a real healing and a real vindication for them that they were not alone," says Jennifer, and "that they had not imagined what had happened to them. It's pervasive in our churches and it's time the church recognizes that some churches do have a problem and it needs to be addressed." It is, she says, critical for the survival of the church itself, as congregations are already rapidly dwindling in size. Jennifer says that many of the victims of abuse she has encountered end up so traumatized by their experience, they give up on the institution forever. "Too many people are leaving the church because they've been hurt by the very people they turn to for comfort and guidance," she says. "We have to put an end to it."