

“Antagonists in the Church”, by Kenneth C. Haugk
Augsburg Publishing House
A Book Review by Julie Martinez

This book came highly recommended to me by an LC-MS pastor who had been through almost the exactly the same type of attack, by a few members of his congregation, that our own pastor and congregation recently experienced. When I read the book, it was uncanny, for he described our situation so accurately it was as if he had experienced it with us. The author, Dr. Haugk, is a clinical psychologist and pastor who has put together a very readable, informative book. He describes the various psychological pathologies of those who make a habit of attacking their own church leaders and congregations, how to recognize warning signs of impending and accelerating attacks, and how to deal with these antagonists in order to prevent further attacks, which, he says, are inevitable, unless something is done.

He differentiates between “antagonists” and the more healthy forms of church conflict, which do exist. The presence of antagonists, he writes, is never healthy, but is invariably harmful to the church and its leadership. He describes an antagonist this way.

Antagonists are individuals who, on the basis of nonsubstantive 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.¹

Recent literature in the area of conflict resolution has begun to recognize that there are individuals who initiate and thrive on unhealthy conflict, persons who have no desire whatsoever to see conflict resolved.²

Antagonism surfaces in a congregation because of a) the nature of antagonists, b) the support antagonists receive from others, and c) the structure of congregations. Antagonists are antagonistic by nature. This means that their antagonism is very rarely a one-time occurrence. Why do people support antagonists? He gives many reasons. Among them is the fact that many people are gullible. Antagonists know this and take advantage of this fact. Many people are also intimidated by the aggressiveness of antagonists, and passively keep silent in the face of attacks for fear of personal retaliation. However, he states that congregational apathy and passive silence is the biggest reason why antagonists are able to do what they do with such impunity. Antagonists are master manipulators, and know how to make their supporters feel important.

Regarding the unique congregational structures and how they contribute to antagonism, Mr. Haugk writes this.

¹ Haugk, Kenneth C., “Antagonists in the Church”, Augsburg Publishing, ©1988, pg 21-22

² Ibid, pg 32

For too long, congregations have been places where antagonists can operate with success. Their behavior is not as successful in many other areas of life because in those areas it is simply not tolerated.Why has there been antagonism in churches? Because too often people have felt that antagonists had to be placated.... Tension over doctrinal points and practical issues can be healthy and will be part of church life until Christ returns. However, when someone with antagonistic tendencies takes hold of such issues, the result is often destructive and divisive. The antagonist is usually not interested in the issues themselves; they are only a means to his or her own peculiar end. ³

In regard to the passive silence and apathy of a congregation, he says that when a congregation is attacked, it needs a very vocal group of people who are willing to confront the antagonists directly in order to give them the firm message that their behavior will not be tolerated. As long as the majority of people silently sit by, thinking the pastor will take care of it and it's not their fight, the more encouraged the antagonists are, and the more they accelerate their attack. He speaks too of the extreme loneliness a pastor under attack experiences when individuals tell him privately they support him, yet will not take a stand and support him publicly or rebuke the attackers. He writes, "Silent supporters are no supporters". The essential point that he makes, which is not intuitive to most people, is that an attack against a pastor is virtually never a problem with the pastor, but with the congregation that allows it to happen, by their silence.

When one individual assumes the whole burden of dealing with an antagonist, the result is rarely healthy. The obligation to deal with the situation properly resides in the corporate leadership of the congregation and, to a lesser extent, in the congregation as a whole. ⁴

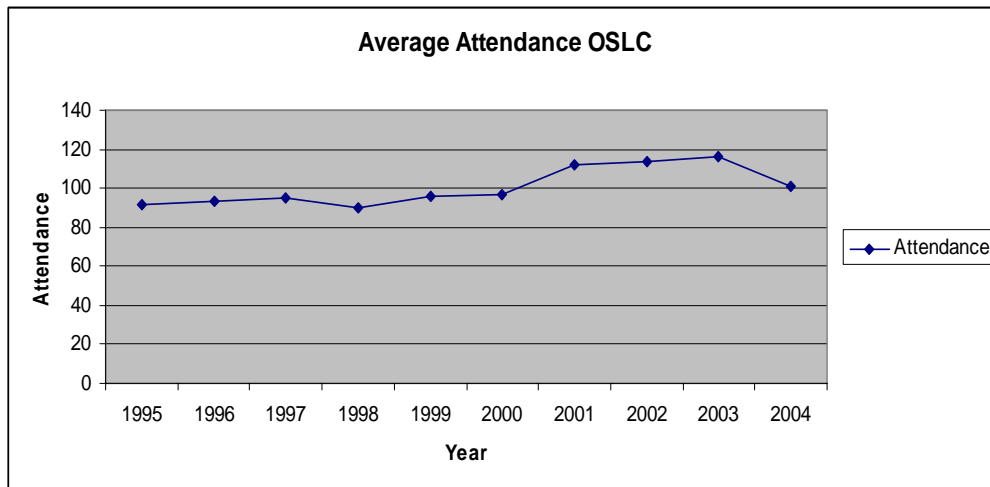
What happens during an attack? The most immediate and obvious effects are that attendance in a previously growing congregation drops off precipitously, and interest in evangelism becomes almost non-existent. People on the fringes of congregational life do not want to be involved in the conflict, and almost everyone loses interest in bringing others into the congregation because of the tense atmosphere and shame people feel because of the attackers and their ungodly behavior. However, the antagonists then jump on the fact that attendance is down, and try to lay the blame for this on the pastor, when it is in actual fact the inevitable result of their own actions.

This is exactly what happened in our congregation. The time our attendance began to drop last summer correlated exactly with the time that the antagonists in our congregation began their attack and it became public knowledge that they were doing so, not just in our congregation, but in our entire community. The following graph, obtained from the LC-MS website proves that fact. In the past 10 years, our average

³ Ibid, pp 39-40

⁴ Ibid, pg 23

attendance had been steadily rising, until 2004, which is exactly when the antagonists began their attack. They may claim that it is the pastor's fault, but a reasonable analysis looks at which factors may have changed and contributed to the decline. In our congregation, as in the description in the book, the pastor's ministry did not change. What did change was that in 2004, the antagonists in our congregation began their attacks, and this unmistakable fact is reflected with stark, unquestionable clarity in the official Synodical statistics.



In the following section of the book, the author identifies personality traits and psychological pathologies which antagonists generally display. While not all antagonists display all of the traits, the general personality traits include:

- Negative self-concept
- Narcissism
- Aggression, which permeates their entire personalities
- Rigidity of thought
- Authoritarianism

Psychiatric Syndromes which are commonly manifested by antagonists include Paranoid Personality Disorder and Antisocial Personality. The author writes,

Marks of a paranoid personality include mistrust, delusions of grandeur, lack of genuine emotions, and hypersensitivity. They tend to see themselves as the center of attention, and when they are not, they begin to do whatever it takes to regain that attention at all times.

A most alarming aspect of the paranoid delusional system is the kernel of truth it inevitably contains. This should not be so surprising; just as it is impossible for church leader to be 100% right, it is similarly difficult for the paranoid antagonist to be 100% wrong. The danger becomes apparent when a paranoid antagonist is

able to convince others that his or her entire delusion is accurate because a small bit is based on reality.

Most antagonists suffer from more than one disorder. A second syndrome accompanying and aggravating paranoia in many antagonists is an antisocial personality. People with antisocial personalities suffer from a significant lack of moral development, accompanied by an inability to live within the limits of socially accepted behavior.⁵

He discusses many other distinguishing characteristics and “red flags” that can let a congregation know when they are faced with an antagonist. There are too many to list here, but a few worth mentioning include a) a previous track record of antagonism toward church leaders and pastors, b) bringing “concerns” to church leadership on behalf of “unnamed others” who have somehow chosen to confide in them, and c), flaunting their financial donations and making a point of letting others know that they are not giving as much to the church because of “the situation”.

He then points out early and late warning signs of an imminent attack by an antagonist, as follows:

Early warning signs:

- A chill in the relationship
- Honeyed “concerns”
- Nettlesome questions
- Mobilizing forces and pot-stirring
- Meddling
- Resistance

Later warning signs:

- Sloganeering – (“There is not enough love in the congregation”)
- Accusing
- Spying
- Distorting
- Misquoting scripture
- “Judas kissing”
- Smirking
- Pestering
- Letter writing
- Pretense
- Lobbying

⁵ Ibid, pp 63-66

The author warns that, when these warnings signs begin to be seen, especially in antagonists who have a long track record of being antagonistic to every pastor and leader the church has had, an attack is imminent. Something must be done to stop the attack before it happens, for antagonists are never satisfied with their small victories. On the contrary, every perceived success only reinforces and emboldens them, so that each subsequent attack become more vicious and more harmful to the leader who is attacked and to the congregation.

How does one prevent antagonists from attacking? Dr. Haugk recommends a Biblical approach. The Bible does speak to this issue in many places.

I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them. (Rom. 16:17)

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for ever Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. (2 Cor. 11:13-14)

As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him (Titus 3:10)

Dr. Haugk writes regarding this:

The word phalanx, (a mobile, impenetrable wall of defense) is the technical term for a military tactic developed by the ancient Greeks. Congregational leaders would do well to form a phalanx, especially when dealing with the more tenacious antagonists. Adopt the phalanx tactic when all roads to reconciliation have failed and the possibility of a creative, healthy resolution is remote at best, but before serious damage is done by antagonism.... By the time matters have reached a stage where a phalanx is called for, it may be that disciplinary measure appropriate to your own ecclesiastical tradition are also called for. Yet there is a reluctance on the part of pastors, lay leaders, and the entire congregation to apply Christian discipline. In the case of antagonists, this reluctance is extremely unfortunate and inappropriate. Once you have determined that you are dealing with an antagonist, you no longer need to be so cautious; indeed, you must not be! ⁶

Dr. Haugk makes it very clear that the presence of antagonists in a congregation, especially those who think, mistakenly, that they have won, make it a virtual certainty that they will attack again, and again, and again, unless the congregation responds to them in a way that lets them know, without any doubt, that their antagonistic behavior will not be tolerated. Our congregation is now at a critical juncture where something must be done to stop this vicious cycle that has been going on here, with the same

⁶ Ibid, pp 153-155

antagonists, for nearly three decades, with increasing venom and viciousness, against every pastor that Our Savior has called.

There is much more in this book than can be covered in this short synopsis. However, I highly recommend this book to each member of Our Savior congregation. It will help each of us understand what has been happening here, the mistakes that have been made to date, the severe spiritual and emotional harm that has been done to each of us in the congregation, and especially how damaging it has been to the ministry of our beloved shepherd and pastor, as well as to his emotional and spiritual well-being. More importantly, it shows how this congregation can stop the cycle, right now, and prevent it from happening again to the next man who we call to be our shepherd.

The book can be purchased on Amazon.com for \$10, and there are several copies presently circulating throughout the leadership of the congregation. It also has a study guide which makes it very effective for small group or congregational study. Knowledge is power, and I pray that, with the knowledge this book imparts, our hurting congregation will be empowered to heal from past attacks and prevent new ones from happening.