

Pastoral Abuse

Because there are power differentials between pastors and their congregation, sometimes pastors are tempted to abuse the people they lead. Most pastoral abuse is male pastors taking advantage of female congregants. The material provided here about pastoral abuse was written by Carol Penner, and first appeared on the website of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, under the heading “Sacred Trust”. All of the stories are fictional.

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1. Can adults be abused? It's a power issue.

Ingrid's Story

Ingrid didn't realize that her unhappiness showed. She thought she was covering it really well until one day after church Pastor Rick asked her, “Is everything OK Ingrid? You look troubled.” Just having someone acknowledge her feelings started the tears rolling down her cheeks.

“If you would like to talk,” he said, “I'm here for you. I have office hours every afternoon.”

Ingrid did go to see Pastor Rick in his office, and it was a huge relief to pour out the sad story of her marriage and how she and her husband lived separate lives under the same roof.

Over the next month she met three more times with Pastor Rick. He was so sympathetic and understanding as she shared her story. He suggested one day that they meet in a park since it was a nice day, and that they go for a walk, instead of meeting in the office.

In the park Rick shared his story, how he felt lonely and misunderstood as well. She felt very close to Rick and honoured that he would be sharing like this with her. He was a real friend. At the end of the afternoon he gave her a hug that made her feel uncomfortable, but she put the thought out of her mind.

She kept going for pastoral visits because they were really helping her feel better. She had such a connection with Rick. During services she and Rick would exchange special deep glances with each other. One day when Rick knew her husband was out of town, he dropped in at her house unexpectedly. "I just wanted to tell you, Ingrid, how much your friendship means to me. It's what's keeping me going in my work. God brought you to me just when I needed you."

Five years later it was hard for Ingrid to explain to the investigative team how she had become sexually involved with her pastor. After several intimate months with Pastor Rick she was overcome with guilt and stopped seeing him. She left her marriage and the church.

Because she was on the church's mailing list, she had received a letter saying that Pastor Rick was on a leave of absence pending an investigation into sexual misconduct. Assuming that he was being investigated for their "affair," she contacted the team to try to help Rick. It was only then she found out two other women from the church had laid complaints. One of them was a young woman nineteen years old.

The team did not blame her for what happened. Instead they explained how professional boundaries worked and that Pastor Rick had crossed the line.

Biblical Grounding: David crosses a line

David was a man after God's own heart. God blessed him and prospered his work as the King of Israel. One day when his troops were out fighting a battle, David spied a beautiful woman who was taking a bath. He found out her name and the story tells us, "So David sent messengers to fetch her, and she came to him, and he lay with her" (2 Samuel 11:4). She conceived a child.

At one time, people might have asked, "Why was Bathsheba taking a bath where someone could spy on her?" or "Why did she go to David?" People through history have sometimes blamed Bathsheba for David's sin, or have seen her as an equal participant in adultery.

Bathsheba does not have a voice in this story except when she tells the King that she is pregnant. David was a king; she was his subject. What would have happened to her if she refused? What could have happened to her husband, who was one of the king's soldiers, if she refused? She was in the king's power from beginning to end. She could not refuse and so the sex was not consensual. Today we would name that act rape.

As a king, David's role was to lead and protect his subjects from harm. Instead of protecting Bathsheba from harm King David misuses his power to violate her, and then murders her husband Uriah. He has used his power not for the good of his country, but for his own selfish interests. You can read on in 2 Samuel 12 to see what message Nathan the Prophet will bring to David. God will hold David to account for his misuse of power.

Professional Ethics: A Pastor's Sacred Trust

Pastors, like doctors, counsellors and other professionals, are given responsibility in their roles. When you seek the services of professionals, you trust that they are governed by a code of ethics.

Professional people providing services have a fiduciary responsibility: they are working for your best interests. You trust professionals, you become vulnerable with professionals.

For example, you allow doctors to see your naked body because you trust them to help you. If your doctor makes sexually suggestive comments to you while you are lying naked on the examining table, or if an attempt is made to kiss you when you are explaining your problems, you feel betrayed, and you can lay a complaint with the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

In a similar way, you trust your pastor to help you. You call a pastor when you are in a crisis, when you are at your most vulnerable, when you are very emotionally fragile. As seen in the story of Ingrid and Pastor Rick, if the pastor takes advantage of you and starts seeking to meet his emotional needs instead of yours and touches you in a sexual way, a boundary has been crossed by the pastor.

Pastoral boundary crossings can be very confusing because pastors are spiritual leaders. You may believe they are chosen by God to do their job; you take them seriously when they counsel you about your life. If your spiritual leader tells you that God brought you together, it can be hard to disagree.

Because of their role as spiritual leaders, when pastors cross a sexual boundary with a congregant, they are violating a sacred trust. They are abusing the power given to them by God and by a community.

Guarding a Sacred Trust

Congregations and denominations call people to leadership in the church. It is the responsibility of the people who give that call to monitor leaders as they do their work and to receive complaints about that work. If pastors are found to have violated that trust by abusing someone in their care, they must be held to account.

2. Finding your voice: Why do survivors wait so long?

Camila's Story

Camila took a deep breath as she slipped the letter addressed to the denominational office into the mailbox. She felt a sense of peace, like a load lifting off her shoulders.

When Camila was seventeen years old, Tyler had been her youth pastor. Camila was in the final month of her senior year of high school. After a youth event, she was in the car Tyler was driving. He dropped off the other young people first, then he took her home the long way. He asked questions about her plans to move across the country to go to college that fall.

Tyler stopped the car at a deserted spot. Camila felt nervous suddenly, but she told herself to calm down. Tyler was her pastor. He said, "Let's get out of the car and look at the stars. They are such a beautiful part of God's creation." She did what she was told. "Do you know how beautiful you are?" he said as he pulled her close. She didn't know what to say; she didn't know what to

do. Tyler kissed her, and then pushed her roughly against the car, pulling up her skirt, unzipping his pants.

Ten minutes later they were on the road again. Camila was crying. Tyler started lecturing her. “What just happened was wrong, Camila. We shouldn’t have done that. But God can forgive us. He can forgive you for tempting me. I’ve seen the way you’ve been looking at me these last months. And when you showed up tonight wearing that little skirt.... God can forgive me for being a man. ‘The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ I forgive you. Do you think you can forgive me?” Camila mumbled a response. “If you really forgive me, you’ll never mention this to anyone,” he said.

That all happened 13 years ago. In her complaint Camila wrote how she hadn’t told anyone. She knew it would kill her parents if they found out. As new immigrants, their church was their extended family. She went silently off to college. She didn’t even tell her parents about the abortion and the guilt she lived with every day. She was too ashamed to pray. She never went to church again.

Her parents wondered why she gave up on church, but they always told her news about everyone. She heard that Tyler had moved on to work in another church, how he’d gotten married, gotten divorced, and moved on again to another church. She told herself she didn’t care what happened to him.

But when her parents told her that Tyler had been hired as the new director of the denomination’s teen camping program, she felt something snap inside her. She knew then that she could no longer keep this a secret. She filed a complaint. She knew it was the truth when she saw the words on the page, “When Tyler was my youth pastor, he raped me.”

Biblical Grounding: No Dark Secrets

Jesus’ harshest words were for the Pharisees. They were the spiritual leaders in Israel, tasked with leading the people to God. Jesus is critical of their hypocrisy, how they said one thing and did another, how they led people away from God rather than to God. Jesus says, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. Therefore, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops” (Luke 12:1b-3).

There are no secrets in the kingdom of heaven. Everyone will be held to account for what they have done, even when it is done in the dark, even when it is a secret that has been kept for years. Even the secret of a youth leader abusing a vulnerable young woman.

Professional Ethics: Holding Leaders Accountable

As a society, we hold professionals to a high standard. They are expected to work in the best interests of vulnerable people. If they fail to do that, and a complaint is laid against them, this is taken seriously even many, many years after the alleged abuse.

We have seen that illustrated in recent years as First Nations survivors of the residential school

system have come forward with complaints against former teachers. In some cases the teachers are alive and are prosecuted by the criminal courts. In other cases, the teachers have died and there is no one to prosecute. The Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was a way for survivors to name what happened to them. In some cases the abuses took place fifty or sixty years ago.

Those who listened to the TRC hearings will never forget the horrific stories they heard there, sometimes being told for the first time. Over and over again, people said that they kept the pain bottled up inside for decades.

Why did it take so long for the truth to come out? Tragically, many First Nations children did tell people what was happening, but over and over they were not believed. Parents and relatives who did believe them were powerless against a racist system that held them captive. With white people in power, there was no safe place for these hurting voices to be truly heard.

Survivors of pastoral abuse may have internalized messages that the abuse was their fault, they may even have difficulty seeing what happened as abuse. The fallout from the abuse may leave them feeling weak, vulnerable and incapable of action. A supportive environment is essential if churches want survivors to lay complaints.

Guarding A Sacred Trust

Thirty years ago almost no churches had “Safe Place Policies.” While there were ethical standards for pastors, most denominations used informal procedures for investigating complaints. Too often, people in power protected abusers. Abuse was swept under the rug. Complaints were not investigated properly, or dismissed altogether. In the process, survivors of abuse were silenced, trivialized and forgotten. People who abused were moved on to new churches. This discouraged others from laying complaints.

As sexual abuse became an issue society cared about, professional organizations started writing abuse policies and investigating complaints. In the 1990s churches started doing this too. But even then, survivors who had the courage to come forward were sometimes re-victimized, their identities revealed.

The church, like so many other organizations, has taken greater care in recent years to not re-victimize survivors. Survivors’ identities are kept confidential and they receive apologies from denominations. They are supported in their healing journey which, in the case of Tyler’s abuse, may include Camila laying criminal charges for sexual assault.

No one chooses to be a victim of abuse. When survivors of abuse find their voice and uncover abusive actions, no matter how long ago it happened, the church will listen and investigate.

3. Crossing the Line: What is Clergy Abuse?

Jewel’s Story

Jewel grew up in a small country church. When she was just eight years old, she had been sexually abused by her father. There had been a trial, and in that long process, the church had stood by Jewel and her mom. But when Jewel was fifteen, she started acting out: skipping school, being disrespectful to her mother, using drugs. At her wit's end, the single mom appealed to her pastor, Jason, to provide pastoral care and to try to talk some sense into her daughter.

With pressure from her mom, Jewel agreed that she would go to the church once a week after her afternoon classes. She arrived at 4 p.m. just as the church administrator was leaving for home.

Jason wanted Jewel to feel comfortable with him, so the first few times they mostly just chatted. He agreed with her that her mother was pretty uptight, and that skipping school wasn't a criminal offence. "I just want to help you. It looks like you are carrying a lot of pain, but you don't have to tell me about it now," he said.

Over the weeks Jewel started to feel she could trust Jason, and when he eventually asked her about the abuse, she opened up about how awful it had been. "The thought of him touching me, it just makes my skin crawl."

Jason shed tears with Jewel as she shared her memories. She reached out for his hand and he took it. When she left that day, he gave her a brief hug and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "I'm so sorry all this happened to you."

The next time she came after school, they sat together on the couch in his office. She reached for his hand as she poured out more of her story. She stroked his hand. At one point he reached and stroked her hair. She thought she might be falling in love with him. When it was time to go, he went to kiss her forehead, but she lifted her head so they kissed on the lips. They kissed for a couple of minutes, before he gently pushed her out the door.

Jewel was very sad when Jason phoned her mom and said he did not have time to continue the sessions, and that Jewel should find another counsellor.

Five years later, Jewel mentioned what had happened in these counseling sessions to a friend, who told Jewel that it sounded abusive and creepy. But Jewel really liked Jason. He had helped her and had really listened. And besides, it was "just kissing."

Biblical Grounding: Who Crossed the Boundary?

Jesus reserves strong words for those who hurt little ones (Matthew 18). Jesus says that instead of hurting a child it would be better that a millstone be hung around their neck and they be drowned in the depth of the sea.

It is never the little one's, the vulnerable person's, responsibility to maintain boundaries. When pastors are credentialed they are given training about boundaries. They are taught that as they interact with vulnerable people, it is their job to make sure no sexual boundaries get crossed.

In the story of Jewel and Jason, she initiated some of the sexual contact. Vulnerable people are sometimes confused, and have poor boundaries; they can make unwise decisions. Jason should have maintained that boundary. This is even more obviously the case since Jewel was a minor, but even if she was 18 what was happening was not consensual. He was her pastor. Sexual activity is not allowed.

In this situation, there are many red flags. Jason was placing himself in a dangerous situation by meeting alone with a teenager. He should have asked the church secretary to stay later, or he could have agreed to meet Jewel in a public place like a coffee shop. He shouldn't have sat on a couch with her.

Talking about childhood abuse is a very sensitive topic. It would have been wise for Jason to refer Jewel to a professional counsellor. He was unprepared for the fact that Jewel might start to have feelings for him, and when she reached out to him he was not prepared to set clear boundaries.

Jason told no one about that first boundary crossing. He thought that he could manage it better next time, but instead things got even more out of control. He felt he managed the situation well by deciding to end the counselling.

Professional Ethics: Who decides it's abuse?

In this situation, Jewel herself never names this as abuse. At this point, no complaint is coming to the church from her. She dismisses it as "just kissing," yet as a survivor of incest, her own ability to set boundaries is very poor. Down the road, when she is older and wiser, will she realize that a person who was supposed to be helping her sexualized a counselling relationship? When she thinks about it more, maybe she will see parallels between what happened with her father (whom she loved), and what happened with Jason.

At that point she might blame herself further. "What is it about me that makes men do this?" Or she might realize that she has been treated badly. "No one was looking out for me." She may feel betrayed by the church and by God. But like most survivors of abuse, Jewel may never lay a complaint.

Jason will carry this story as a secret, as a near-miss experience. He saw where it might have led. He feels virtuous that he gently pushed Jewel out the door instead of having sex with her, which was a real possibility. Because he ended the relationship, and because it was "just kissing," he too might minimize what happened. He might not see that he was not truly there for Jewel, and that he abused her. He might not see how he failed her as a pastor.

From a larger church perspective, it's crystal clear. What Jason did was sexual misconduct. He could be criminally charged for sexual interference with a minor.

Guarding A Sacred Trust

Sexual abuse by a pastor can range from sexual comments about appearance all the way to rape. It can include a pastor showing pornography to a congregant or sending them sexualized text or Facebook messages. It can be sharing dirty jokes that make a congregant uncomfortable, or spying on them in the washroom. It can include seemingly mutual and affectionate kissing, fondling and oral sex or physically holding someone down as they resist sexual advances.

A pastor may admit to the victim that it's wrong, or they may claim that they are in a mutual loving relationship. The topic of God may or may not be invoked in the situation, but spiritual leadership is always implied because the pastor is in a role of authority. Pastors are responsible whenever a sexual boundary is crossed.

4. Secrets & Lies: The Long-term Cost for Survivors?

Kyla's Story

Kyla had always seen herself as a "good girl." She never partied, concentrating on getting good grades. When she was in grade 11, her parents sent her to a boarding school they had attended in a small town. Because she was so homesick and feeling so isolated, a teacher suggested a local Christian counselling agency.

Initially the counselling with John really seemed to help her. But as she started to trust John more, he started asking more and more personal questions. He wanted to know about her "love life." He suggested that a lot of her insecurity was sexual. The "counselling sessions" soon had a physical component.

She wanted to stop seeing John, but in some way she was flattered that a man much older than herself was so interested in her. At the same time, she felt terribly guilty that what they were doing was wrong. He told her that they hadn't had sexual intercourse, so it wasn't wrong, and that she was sexually inhibited, and he was helping her learn to love herself as a sexual being that God created.

Sometimes Kyla felt she cared for John, and that this was sort of like dating. Other times she was filled with self-loathing. Kyla wanted a real boyfriend so she tried dating boys in her class. But John would want to hear all about it in their "counselling sessions." She gradually dropped the few friends she did have.

Some days John told her he loved her; other times he made veiled threats that he would talk about her "instability" so that people would not believe her if she talked. She was sure no one would believe her because she was a nobody. John was a deacon in her church and he sat on Town Council.

Finally, she graduated, and returned home. Kyla jumped into a relationship with the first boy she met in college; it turned out badly. So she found another relationship, and another. Most of all, she felt bad about herself, that she was very sinful. She didn't know how to pray, God seemed very far away.

In her senior year, she found that she was pregnant. She married the father, hoping that this would bring some normalcy to her life. But their marriage was unhappy from the beginning. Kyla went from depression to depression. She looked back at her life, and wondered how she could have screwed things up so badly.

Kyla ended up in the hospital after a failed suicide attempt. In a residential treatment setting, a counsellor started getting to the root of her unhappiness. It was only then, ten years after the fact, that Kyla started to name what John had done to an innocent young woman. The counsellor talked to her about the option of getting legal advice and going to the police to lay charges. She started to wonder whether she was the only person that John had abused.

Biblical Grounding

Survivors of pastoral abuse can struggle with faith in God that others take for granted. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight” Proverbs 3:5. Verses like this one are terribly problematic for victims of pastoral abuse. The person who abused them had convinced them to ignore their own insights about what was right or wrong. Their own insights were over-ridden by a powerful personality, a personality that had religious power and authority.

Making the transition from being a victim of abuse to being a survivor of abuse involves claiming your own insight, and owning it. No one, even someone with religious authority, can change your mind.

Where does God come into the story? That’s the challenge because trust in religious authority is shattered. Sometimes it can be hard to trust God again, when the leaders who are supposed to lead you to God were so abusive.

Communities help survivors on their healing journey by surrounding them with love and giving them a safe place to rebuild their faith from the ground up.

The Cost of Secrets and Lies

Abuse by a church leader always involves secrets and lies. A survivor can fear punishment or physical harm. Or they keep the secret because they worry that people will blame them for what happened. Sometimes they get so tired of keeping this secret that they minimize it, and say it wasn’t important.

Living a lie, and pretending things are fine when inside you are dying, is one of the most excruciating ways to live. Relationships feel false. The pain inside you comes out in unhealthy ways. Survivors of abuse sometimes engage in self-harming behaviors, through cutting themselves, abusing drugs or alcohol or making unwise or unsafe choices.

Survivors can have low self-esteem, feeling responsible for the abuse, and blaming themselves for getting involved, for not stopping the abuse, even for not having the courage to tell the truth.

Low self-esteem can lead to poor relationships and career choices, as you feel you don't deserve better.

Sometimes survivors have a troubled relationship with their own body and their own sexuality. They can feel that their body betrayed them, they can feel they are not at home in their own skin. This profound alienation goes to the core of human spirituality and can even affect physical health.

Some survivors of abuse, particularly if the abuse happened when they were very young, are more or less successful at burying the memories. Some adults may live their lives with no conscious memories of abuse although they may feel troubled and conflicted.

Sometimes survivors experience flashbacks, which are intrusive physical memories that take you back to the situation. These post-traumatic stress reactions can be debilitating. When a reckoning about the costs of abuse finally starts to sink in, survivors have to deal with anger and rage at the person who abused them, at the institution that allowed it to happen, and even at God.

Seeking justice and accountability is often a part of the healing journey. Options need to be weighed, considering their benefits and costs.

The Good News

The good news is that you can heal from abuse by a church leader. Freedom from guilt, shame and fear is possible. The first step is telling your story to someone you can trust. Thankfully, more and more churches are understanding the seriousness of pastoral abuse, and are dealing with complaints in professional ways.

5. Survivors Helping Survivors: Healing Together

Gina's Story

Gina was in the cloakroom after attending the seniors' potluck at church. She was reaching up over the coat-rack to retrieve her scarf when she was shocked to feel someone's hand quickly slide up under her sweater and underneath her bra strap. Startled and scared, she whirled around and jumped back at the same time. She could not believe her eyes; it was her pastor who had touched her! She felt very afraid suddenly, and confused as he looked at her and smiled. She ran out of the church without her scarf.

Gina was in turmoil. Could this really have happened? She felt like she was going crazy. This simply didn't make sense. She felt dirty and violated. She stayed away from church for several weeks. Eventually she went back to church but kept her distance from the pastor, being careful to never be alone with him. He caught her eye across the room during a meeting and smiled. She suddenly felt nauseous and had to leave. A month later she decided to do something. She arranged a meeting with her church council chairperson, a woman, and explained what had

happened. The chairperson looked distraught as Gina told her story. “Do you believe me?” Gina asked, when she had finished.

“Yes, I believe you. And I am sorry to say we received another complaint like this last week, and we are just sorting out how to handle it. Thank you for coming forward with your story. I am so sorry this happened to you.”

Pastor Dave was put on a paid leave of absence as the two complaints were investigated. The congregation was informed that sexual harassment allegations had come against their pastor, asking other potential complainants to come forward. Over the next month five more women came forward with complaints of their necks being caressed, inappropriate hugs and sexually suggestive comments. Some incidents had taken place two years earlier.

The congregation hired an outside consultant to conduct an investigation, and to help with the healing process. This consultant convened a meeting for complainants to meet each other.

It was an emotional evening, as each shared what had happened. “I know it only took a few seconds, but it changed my life.” “I thought it was my fault. Should I have worn that dress to church?” “I would have said something earlier, but I was worried I was blowing something out of proportion. And I didn’t think people would believe me.” “I feel like I lost my church. I haven’t been able to feel comfortable in worship.” “I don’t know if I’ve ever felt so powerless before.” “I haven’t been able to process my own feelings since my husband found out. He’s so angry, he wants to go and have it out with Dave.”

Over and over again they said to one another, “How can a pastor do something like this... he’s supposed to be a man of God!”

Biblical Grounding: From the Ground Up

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

Pastoral abuse is “crazy making.” In other words, it is so far out of one’s experience and expectations that it can feel like you are living in a surreal dream. Gina seriously wondered whether she had imagined the whole thing because it seemed so impossible. Could she even trust her own memory?

Finding out that Dave had abused other women changed things significantly for her. She was horrified that other women went through what she did. At the same time she was also relieved because she could finally believe her own memory and gut feelings. Meeting with the women was very empowering. She was with people who were really listening. Their listening helped her to articulate the pain she was feeling. Together they felt their voice would not be ignored. They would support each other as they tried to move on.

Professional Ethics: Casting a Net

If Pastor Dave was a denominational leader, or had worked in schools or camps, he could have abused people in those settings as well. In that case it would be appropriate for church leaders to

spread the word in those circles too that a complaint had been received, encouraging others who had experienced any inappropriate behaviour to come forward.

Casting a wide net to find survivors of abuse is sometimes controversial, particularly if allegations come forward after someone has died. Allies of the pastor may feel that his reputation is being needlessly destroyed in the larger church. There is a feeling of “let sleeping dogs lie.” “If people don’t come forward of their own accord, then it must not be very bad.” Some are worried that deceased persons cannot defend their reputation, or it will hurt living relatives.

However the experience of survivors of abuse is clear. Many suffer lasting and debilitating consequences because they are isolated and alone. Their healing journey often begins when they share their story.

Just as the abuser cast a wide net to find victims, so the church must cast a wide net to help save survivors from the pain of secrets and lies.

Not an easy road

Although it is helpful to find others who have experienced pain like your own, it is never easy being a survivor. Hearing how others have been abused is excruciating, particularly when the pain is so real in your own life. There are decisions to be made about confidentiality. Certain people in the group may want to come forward publicly while others decide to remain anonymous.

Much as churches pay lip service to not blaming the victim, often survivors of abuse can feel ostracized or blamed for the consequences a pastor faces. Members in the church might look at the abuse and judge that it “wasn’t that bad.” They may feel that the complainants are ganging up on the pastor or exaggerating what the effects are in their lives. Survivors can support each other as they navigate the stormy waters of an investigation and its aftermath.

6. Pastoral Abuse: The Congregation's Story

Winter at Moss St. Church

Aiden had been an associate pastor at Moss Street Church for two years when it all came crashing down. He had left his laptop open in his office when he went to a meeting. The church secretary needed something in Aiden’s office and she happened to glance at the screen, and saw a naked photo of one of the youth in their church.

She reported this to the senior pastor, who went and saw the picture too. He took the laptop and locked it in his office, and called the police. Aiden was put on a paid leave of absence, which was what their misconduct policy required. A police investigation eventually revealed that Aiden had extensive and inappropriate Facebook contact with two young men in the church. One was 16, one was 17. Aiden faced criminal charges.

Meanwhile Moss Street Church was in crisis. The young men were ashamed and humiliated, and worried about their privacy. Their families were very angry with Aiden because of the long-term trauma the two young men might face.

Rumours and speculations were running rampant about what exactly had happened and who was involved. The church board initially was reluctant to make any public statements because of the police investigation. There was a lot of anxiety and even anger. Some felt that the church board was trying to protect Aiden. Some were particularly infuriated that he was still on the church's payroll, when they knew that he was guilty.

Aiden was the nephew of a prominent church member, and that family was hurting too. They felt Aiden's career and even his life was ruined. They were upset and angry.

Aiden was saying that the young men initiated this contact. Was it Aiden's fault if they sent him pictures? They felt the whole thing was being blown out of proportion. "It was just some guys horsing around," they said. Others suggested that the young men had conspired to get the associate pastor in trouble.

Meanwhile, the senior pastor was trying to help everyone. Over the next few months, he saw the church being polarized, but he didn't know how to stop it. When he preached sermons on justice, people were angry that he wasn't talking about reconciliation. When he preached sermons on forgiveness, people were angry that he wasn't talking about abuse of power. He felt people looked at him with distrust, yet he had done nothing wrong. The church secretary was so distraught, she took a medical leave of absence.

As the church held congregational meetings to process what was happening, the grievances started to pile up. There was anger at the search committee that had not thoroughly investigated the youth pastor's references. There was disappointment in the senior pastor for not overseeing his associate adequately. There was unhappiness from some that this "misunderstanding" had been turned over to the police when it could have been solved internally.

In the midst of all this, it was hard to remember that they were supposed to be a congregation sharing the good news of Jesus. It was hard to see good news anywhere.

Good Friday Times

"Jesus wept" (John 11:35). After the high points of the Transfiguration and the Procession into Jerusalem, it was hard for Jesus to be praying alone in the garden, facing his own death. We don't know exactly what was going on in his mind, but he was agitated and upset, praying that he could avoid the cross.

At a Good Friday service six months after the arrest, the senior pastor preached about Jesus in the garden; "We need to fall on our knees and pray too!" From the senior pastor's point of view, things couldn't get much worse.

While it was a low time for the congregation, the 12-month mark was also hard, as Aiden appeared in court and was sentenced. But it was the 18-month mark when the congregation hit rock bottom.

Some people wanted to study the topic of abuse in adult Sunday school, but others felt that the congregation had been through enough. There was arguing as to whether Aiden should be taken off the church membership list. Aiden's position had not been filled. The senior pastor was overworked and burnt out. A number of key families had left the church, which meant that the church was not meeting its budget. People were arguing about money and what programs should be cut. Some felt they needed a whole new change in leadership.

Good News in the Winter of our Discontent

All churches go through seasons. There is a springtime season when a church is planted, a summer season when things are going well and an autumn season when there are rich harvests. But every congregation goes through winter seasons, when things feel dead and it's hard to believe that spring can come again.

When pastoral abuse happens in a church, it can feel like a raging blizzard has struck in sunny September. Winter has been thrust upon the congregation, and they had no say in the matter. It is very discouraging to realize that the sinful actions of one person can have such deep ramifications for the whole organization.

The good news is that congregations do not have to reinvent the wheel. Other churches have been through pastoral abuse winters, and there are excellent resources available. Denominational leaders have expertise in dealing with pastoral abuse investigations, and there are skilled resource people who can be brought in to conduct investigations and give counsel to the church board as to the best practices.

Outside resource people will remind you that while the whole church is hurting, special care must be taken for those most affected. At times the congregation can be so wrapped up in its own pain that it can forget about the survivors themselves or secondary victims, like Aiden's family members. Everyone needs a support group; the victims and their families and the accused and their families.

It is particularly challenging being a part of a support group for the pastor. Pastors are often well loved, and it can be hard to hold them accountable for their actions, particularly if they are experiencing grief from losing their job and their reputation.

Guarding A Sacred Trust

Finally, God is present in every season. Churches that have gone through winter seasons say that while it was difficult, they also drew closer to God. Churches have to really grapple with what they are about, and whether they truly love each other. It's easy to love each other when things are going great, but when there is deep conflict, our love is tested. Healing happens, but it can take years.

7. Alternatives to Denial

Denial at Many Nations Church

Anil, the church board chair of Many Nations Church, wondered what the issue was when their youth pastor, Petra, arrived at the door of his house. She burst into tears when he opened the door, and between her sobs she choked out some words, “Pastor Carl and I... we did... sexual things... for a couple of months... I couldn’t believe it at first... but I know it’s wrong... what should I do?”

Anil couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Pastor Carl had almost single-handedly turned Many Nations Church around since arriving five years ago. Attendance and giving was up and Pastor Carl was loved and respected. Petra had just started eight months ago. She was straight out of Bible college. Anil had concern for Petra, but at the same time, he was very worried about the church. What would happen if this was true? How could this story get out of control? He tried to calm Petra down, and he told her he would handle it.

The next day Anil made an appointment with his pastor to tell him what Petra had said. Pastor Carl looked shocked. “I’ve been afraid of this, Anil. Petra has not been very stable. I am really concerned about her. I don’t know why she would be making up stories about me like this. Yes, I’ve hugged her, but, honest to God, it’s always like a brother. She’s been difficult to work with since her six month performance review, which wasn’t very positive, as you remember.”

Anil was so relieved to hear Carl’s reassurance. Maybe Petra needed some help. She did seem hysterical when she talked to him, and what she was saying about Pastor Carl was entirely out of character for him. Carl added, “And how is your mother doing Anil? Should I drop by the hospital tonight?”

Anil decided not to press Petra on her lies; he thought maybe she needed a break. He told the rest of the church board that Petra had some “stress issues” and he arranged to have her salary paid for three months, saying that people needed to respect her privacy. He secretly hoped she would never come back from that leave as she didn’t seem up to the demands of church work.

Anil wasn’t prepared when six weeks later, three women from the Women’s Bible Study Group confronted him. “Petra was sexually abused by our pastor. Did you know about this?” Anil tried to do damage control but it didn’t work. In the coming weeks rumours started flying everywhere.

Pastor Carl was in the centre of the talk. People observed that he took the high road, never saying anything negative about Petra. He received a lot of support, “We’ve never had such a good pastor! We won’t let a mentally unstable person destroy his reputation!” This went on for two months.

It was Pastor Carl’s wife Becky who changed everything. She sent a letter to the church board, copied to Petra, corroborating Petra’s story. “I walked in on Petra and Carl one afternoon. I was supposed to be gone all day but I came home and heard noises in the bedroom. I walked away quietly. I didn’t want to believe Carl was being unfaithful, and with a girl in her early 20s. I

thought I could salvage my marriage if I just worked harder. At first I blamed Petra. But Carl was her supervisor and 20 years older. Carl needs help.”

A Pervading Sense of Denial

When sexual boundaries are crossed in the church, everyone wants to deny it. Petra denied her own feelings that something was wrong because Carl was her boss, her pastor, her mentor. He said physical contact was a good thing, a gift from God. It was very hard for her to admit that what was happening was wrong.

Anil, from the church board, didn't want to believe that his pastor could abuse his power. Anil didn't want anything to harm the reputation of the church that he loved which was doing so well after a long period of decline. Carl had always been a good pastor to him. Others disbelieved the rumours because they, too, were loyal to their trusted spiritual guide.

Pastor Carl had everything to lose: his job, his reputation, his income, his career, his marriage. To protect all of this he was prepared to lie. He had a lot of credibility in the church and he was banking on it. He had no idea that his wife knew about his actions.

Even Pastor Carl's wife was in denial at first. She saw the unfaithfulness with her own eyes but she did not want to believe that her husband was betraying their wedding vows, and with a younger woman. As the reality sank in, at first she denied it was her husband's fault, blaming Petra. It took a while for her to believe that her husband could take advantage of a young and impressionable co-worker.

King David in Denial

Nathan was a prophet who was called to expose King David's wrongdoing. David had sexually abused Bathsheba, the wife of his soldier Uriah. Then he had Uriah sent to the front lines so that he would be killed.

David was in denial. He wasn't admitting that he had sinned. He probably had all sorts of rationalizations. He hadn't "technically" killed anyone, and maybe he even thought Bathsheba wanted to be his partner. But Nathan cut through his denials and exposed his sin, telling him, "...you have despised the word of the Lord..." (2 Samuel 12:9). David must come clean with God and face the truth of his actions.

Facing the Truth

Denial is almost certainly present on many levels whenever allegations of sexual misconduct emerge. While we value truth telling and honesty in the church, it is a sad reality that we are not always truthful with each other. We are capable of deceiving ourselves and others, sometimes for long periods of time.

That's why it is vitally important that allegations of misconduct be taken seriously; they cannot be handled privately. All too often allegations of misconduct are diverted to an informal process,

and a misconduct policy is sidestepped, because some or many of the people in the church are in denial.

Guarding a Sacred Trust

Anil and the Many Nations church board can end denial by getting help from their denominational office or an outside consultant. Denominational staff would likely advise them to hire an interim minister, whose primary job would be to help them openly address the woundedness of their community. Moving forward will mean addressing this boundary crossing head on, telling the truth, and working for healing for everyone in the story.

8. Picking Up the Pieces: Families Suffer Too

Sarah's Story

Sarah felt proud every Sunday when her husband Simon stood with his guitar in front of Beulah Land Church. He had just the right words to lead people in worship, and his voice was beautiful. His faith in God shone through everything he did. He was a wonderful dad to their two young teenage daughters.

Simon was so gifted that it was no surprise that not only did he lead the music ministry at his large urban congregation, he also fronted worship bands at regional and provincial youth events, and even national conferences. Simon had a home-based computer business which allowed him to pursue his volunteer worship leading extensively (he sometimes received honorariums for larger events).

Simon and Sarah's pastor, Laura, was shocked by a revelation from Winnie, a 19-year-old singer in the worship band. Winnie had stopped coming to church over the summer, and never came back in the fall. It was November and Laura was following up. They met in a coffee shop, and the first thing Laura noticed was that Winnie looked pregnant. It wasn't during that first meeting, but only two months later when they had established a trusting rapport, that Winnie confided that the father of her child was Simon.

"He told me he loved me!" Winnie said. "He told me that Sarah was cold and unloving, and that he wanted to leave her for me. I thought he meant it, but when I got pregnant... he told me I had to get an abortion. He said he would kill himself if I told anyone, he told me how he would do it."

After this sobering conversation, Laura quickly found an advocate to walk with Winnie, who subsequently decided to write a letter of complaint to the church. Laura met with Winnie's family, who were not churchgoers. She sat with them as they expressed anger and betrayal that this would happen at a church. "We thought she couldn't get into trouble... she was at a church!" Laura also set up a support group for Winnie.

Laura recalled the many young women that Simon worked with in various settings. With misgivings, she remembered coming into church late at night, seeing Simon alone with a young woman, coaching her singing.

Simon was immediately asked to step down from worship leading, pending the investigation, which was to be done by an outside resource team. The Beulah Land church board made this decision after some discussion: Simon was not a credentialed employee but he was a sanctioned ministry leader.

After initial interviews and consultation, the team decided to recommend that the church issue a press release for the denominational newspaper. Since Simon had been involved with young women for several years across the country, there could be other victims. The news release would be brief, simply saying that an allegation of sexual misconduct against Simon was being investigated. Contact numbers for the independent resource team were provided in case anyone else had further information or allegations.

The church provided a support group for both Simon and for Sarah. Sarah was devastated. “I lost my church. We went from being at the centre to being cast out, and I didn’t do anything wrong.” Simon had confessed to his “affair,” and denied that there was anyone else. He said Winnie had come on to him. Sarah didn’t understand why the church was so determined to ruin their lives by publicizing Simon’s indiscretion in the church newspaper. She loved Simon but was desperately hurt and betrayed. She didn’t know if her marriage would survive. She was dealing with anger towards Winnie too. “How do I talk to my kids about this whole thing?” Sarah asked her support group. “They asked me whether this baby will be their brother or sister. What do I say?”

Don’t Miss Any Casualties

Sexual misconduct arrives in a congregation like a truck hitting a crowd of people. There is pain and devastation everywhere. Just as in an accident, some people get attention first. In the case of misconduct of a church leader, it is not surprising that many rally around the leader. Sometimes (more rarely) people rally around the person who is making the complaint. The pain of secondary victims, such as the family members of both the victim and the person who has offended is often overlooked. They need support and companions on their journey.

Winnie’s family is supporting their daughter through this betrayal, and they will help her care for an infant who was unplanned. Winnie’s dad is living with a disability and hasn’t worked for a year, money is tight, they live with Winnie in a small apartment. How will they afford this baby? How can the church offer help that is both sensitive and practical?

The support group for Sarah also faces big challenges. It’s hard for them to hear her bewildering array of emotions. One day she is angry at Simon and threatening to leave him. The next time they meet she is defending him and full of anger at the church that she thinks is scapegoating him.

A Family Falls Apart

The Bible has some vivid and horrifying stories of sexual violence. We hear of King David’s daughter, Tamar, being raped by her brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13). Tamar’s other brother, Absalom, is a secondary victim. David does nothing to discipline Amnon, his first-born. Absalom tries to comfort his sister, but in his heart, he is plotting revenge.

Since Tamar could never get married now, she moved in with Absalom's family. Soon we see Absalom murdering Amnon. This sets in motion a series of plots in David's family. The pain of secondary victims is real. They have complex emotions and play an important role in how abuse is processed.

The Congregation as a Secondary Victim

Beulah Land Church was in the midst of ambitious building expansion plans. In the year after news of the boundary crossing hit, attendance and giving dropped off. It is common for people to resent someone like Winnie who can be blamed for "causing the problem." More rarely, anger can be focused on the beloved church leader. People are often critical of the process.

The congregation is also a secondary victim because the boundary crossing has set in motion a great deal of conflict. Many people react strongly and in different ways to what has happened. This all needs to be processed. Where is Jesus in the midst of this bewildering and painful time?

9. Healthy Boundaries, Healthy Pastors

The Story at Green Pastures

Gerald was the hardworking lead pastor of Green Pastures, a large suburban church. He and his wife had four children under ten, so there were a lot of family demands. The church relied on him to give 110%.

Gerald had an assistant pastor, Bev, to whom he did not relate well. Although she was younger than him, she had more education, and was very competent. Secretly, Gerald was jealous of Bev because she was such a good preacher, had a very easy pastoral presence, and was very popular.

The church also had an administrator, Patti. Patti found herself in the unfortunate position of being the person in the middle. Gerald frequently vented his criticism about Bev to Patti. And Patti overheard how Gerald spoke in a disrespectful voice to Bev, telling her in rude language that she was falling short in various areas. Bev confided in Patti that Gerald would continually keep looking down at her breasts when he was talking to her. It made her very uncomfortable.

Gerald was facing a major review and renewal of his contract. There had been some pointed comments from some of his church members such as, "A pastor needs to know when it's time to go." Financially his family was just scraping by, and he was worried about unemployment if the contract was not renewed.

Tension between Gerald and Bev continued to escalate, to the point that Bev wouldn't talk to Gerald unless there was a third party present. She addressed the abusive comments with the board chair, but she didn't mention anything about the intrusive looking that was making her uncomfortable. She didn't know how to talk about it, she wasn't sure whether people would believe her.

The incidents with Patti started with a few comments here or there. Gerald told Patti how much he was looking forward to spending time at the gym. “It’s a great gym, there’s lots to see, so many good looking young women to watch as you work out.” Other days he would make comments about other women’s bodies. Seeing a fashion magazine on Patti’s desk, he pointed to a model and said, “That’s the kind of woman I find so sexy. Do you think she’s attractive?” Patti was very uncomfortable when Gerald would talk like this, but she dealt with it by just ignoring the comments.

Gerald gave some correspondence to Patti to file, and in the pile there was a single sheet with a vivid handwritten description of a sexual act. Patti was so embarrassed she didn’t know what to do. She quickly shredded it. Gerald didn’t say anything to her about it, but she thought he had a funny smile on his face the next day.

One Monday morning, her computer wasn’t working so she decided to use Gerald’s to access some information she needed on the internet. Out of curiosity, she looked at his browsing history and saw a number of what looked like pornographic websites. She decided to tell one of the elders in the church (her brother-in-law) about everything that was happening. The elder came that night when no one was in the church and spent a couple of hours on Gerald’s computer. Afterwards he went to have a talk with Gerald. Gerald handed in his resignation the following week.

Unhealthy Coping Strategies

Pornography was an addiction that Gerald had struggled with for years. But it was only in the last year that he started using it at work. He found it to be a helpful distraction when his worries at church overwhelmed him. He had no idea how his use of pornography was pervading his relationships with the women in his life.

Gerald was feeling very overworked. The board of elders had laid out a direction for the church that would require more of his time. The finance committee was saying that giving was down and the church really needed more dynamic preaching to bring in congregants. Gerald felt that if he challenged anyone, saying their expectations were unrealistic, they would think poorly of him. He was worried that Bev would take on these new projects and excel at them. And his wife was irritated and upset because he wasn’t spending enough time at home with the kids.

Gerald’s feelings of insecurity came out in his relationships with Bev and Patti. He enjoyed getting a rush out of making them feel uncomfortable.

The house of cards came falling down when the elder threatened to expose his pornography addiction to the police (some of the saved pictures on his computer were of girls). Gerald had protested that the girls were not that young. The elder was firm; if Gerald resigned and promised to get help, he would not call the police.

Gerald resolved to be stronger in his next church, and at least keep his pornography habit out of the church office.

In Training

Train yourself in godliness, for while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come (I Timothy 4:7-8).

How we spend our time determines how our mind works. When someone chooses to immerse their mind continually in pornographic images that depict women and girls in degrading acts, they are training their mind to think in certain ways about women.

Gerald openly sexualized his relationships with Bev and Patti and this has poisoned his working relationships.

When he is caught by the elder, Gerald admits to himself (but not to the elder) that things have gotten out of control. He has become obsessed with sexual thoughts. He is determined to put some limits on his pornography addiction. He doesn't see the boundaries he has crossed with his co-workers.

Caretaking for Good Boundaries

Green Pastures Church has not done a good job caring for either of their pastors. They have unrealistic demands, and have given them few outlets for honest conversation about their work. Instead, individuals have been giving Gerald mixed messages about his leadership, which has only increased his anxiety.

When the conflict between Gerald and Bev escalated, the church board chair stepped in. Instead of getting to the root of the problem, he simply sat in on meetings, frustrated that these two intelligent people had personality problems. He didn't see gender as a factor in the conflict and didn't pick up on clues Bev gave him.

The church had a sexual misconduct policy somewhere, but it was not up to date and there was no person clearly designated to receive complaints, even if Bev or Patti had decided to address the harassment they were experiencing.

The elder felt he was doing the best thing for Green Pastures Church by getting Gerald to resign. In doing so, Gerald was not held accountable by the church. Because the denominational office was not informed, they were unable to help him, setting him up for failure in his next congregation.

10. It's A Long Road to Justice and Healing

William and his wife Paula were the best youth sponsors that Four Corners Community Church could remember. When the youth pastor position became vacant, and William couldn't find work as an English professor, he was eagerly hired by the congregation.

Four Corners was an urban congregation, reaching out to youth from the multi-ethnic neighbourhood around them. Brent, the senior pastor, worked well with William. Six months later, Brent was dumbfounded by a visit from Orlando, the father of sixteen-year-old Maria, one of the youth group members. Orlando was furious, practically yelling, "Her mother walked into

her room last night, and there she was in front of the computer with no shirt on, nothing on top. She was talking to William. My wife saw him.”

Maria confessed to her mother that William had asked her to take her shirt off, and that they had been Skyping for some weeks. Orlando immediately called the police.

William was arrested, charged with internet luring. His computers and mobile devices were seized. He told the police and later Brent, “Yes, I was Skyping her, but I could only see her face. I had no idea she was naked.” William spent two nights in jail before being released on bail, with the condition that he not go on the internet, and he would stay away from places where minors under 18 were present.

The church board met the day William was arrested to talk about this crisis, inviting a representative from their denominational office to be there. William was put on a paid leave of absence, pending the trial, following the guidelines in their safe spaces policy.

The church board called a special meeting for the members of the congregation after a Sunday service. A consultant hired in consultation with their denomination announced that there was a police investigation involving William and an unnamed minor. Some sat in stunned silence, a few started to cry. Others demanded more information. “How is William doing?” “What can we do to support him?” “Who made this accusation?”

Maria’s father was in the meeting although he had been advised to stay away. Brent could see him becoming visibly angry as all support seemed to move towards the pastor and not the unknown victim who was laying the charges.

There was pressure on the church board to make their own investigation but their sexual misconduct policy clearly stated that in all cases involving minors, child welfare organizations and the police would do the investigation.

Waiting in the Whirlwind

In the months following the disclosure, there was a lot of blame being laid. In hindsight the Four Corners church board regretted that they had hired a person who had not received any training about ethics and sexual boundaries. The denomination had been in the process of interviewing William for credentialing purposes, but that had not been completed at the time he was accused.

The church board offered to provide support groups for William and his wife Paula, but Paula refused, saying she refused to be involved in this “witch hunt.” While they were waiting for the trial, William was hospitalized for a suicide attempt, which only solidified Paula’s view that the church was persecuting her husband.

Much as the church tried to keep the identity of the victim secret, Maria had shared her story with one of her friends and soon everyone knew her identity. Some people believed William and blamed Maria for his breakdown. Sexual gossip about Maria’s relationship with a previous older boyfriend was also being circulated. Maria had racist and sexist comments posted on social

media about her by people in the youth group. Maria and her family left the church, angry and bitter at this response. Faced with this whirlwind of pain and brokenness, the church board prayed fervently to God for a way forward.

The Long Road

Six months after charges were laid the church dismissed William for professional misconduct. Other women in the youth group, when interviewed by police, revealed they had conversations with William on Skype too, although nothing overtly sexual had happened with them. The dismissal was justified because private contact with minors was against the church's safe spaces guidelines. It took 18 months for the case to go to trial, and in the end William was convicted and went to jail.

The church continued to reach out to Maria and her family, paying for counselling for Maria. Her parents did eventually come back to church for a visit, but they chose to transfer their membership away. Being abused by a pastor left deep scars on Maria, she was afraid to trust people in authority and she wanted nothing to do with the church. Testifying in court had been a harrowing experience. Because of the emotional turmoil she experienced, she delayed entering university for a year, but ended up pursuing a degree in social work.

Eventually William and Paula did agree to have a support group, largely because of the dedicated visits of one of the deacons during William's hospitalization. Three years after the event William did confess to his wife that he was guilty, although he did not admit this publicly. It took another two years of support and accountability before William was ready to write a letter of apology to Maria.

The misconduct highlighted for the leadership team that their congregation needed more training about sexual boundaries. They held a workshop about sexual harassment and abuse, inviting the local women's shelter to be a resource. Pastor Brent preached a series on sexual violence in the Bible, and the new youth leaders also led a series for the youth on "Creating Safe Spaces."

The misconduct also revealed that racism was a real problem in their church community. They hired an outside facilitator to lead racism training; it helped them realize the work that needed to be done if they truly wanted to be an inclusive and welcoming community.

Decades in the Making

"Jacob said, '...for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God —since you have received me with such favour'" (Genesis 33:10).

Jacob and his brother Esau suffered a family rift over Jacob's sinful behavior. It took literally decades for them to actually see each other face to face. That's when Jacob says the amazing words we find here. But complete reconciliation never happens. Jacob does not accept an invitation to live with Esau. Trust is not entirely restored. They go their own ways.

When pastoral sexual misconduct happens in a congregation, it is not going to be resolved in a few months or often even in a few years. Healing from this type of betrayal, if it happens, often

takes decades. It poses a challenge for congregations. Do we have enough love in our hearts to walk this long road together?

11. Navigating Temptations

Jennifer moved from across the country to become the pastor of Lakeside Beach Church just after graduating from seminary. She had served as a youth pastor for a few years before her studies; this was her first solo pastoral charge.

Michael, the church chair, knew that they had taken a risk hiring this relatively inexperienced pastor, but he had encouraged the church to go out on a limb with a younger person. As a father of teenagers, he hoped that a younger pastor would engage the young adults. Jennifer's Cree background was also seen as an asset, as the largely white congregation wanted to reach out to the community which included a significant First Nations population. The congregation hoped that Jennifer could help them learn to build bridges.

Jennifer was so excited about what God was doing and could do at Lakeside Park. She did struggle with issues of self-confidence, seeing as this was her first time being a lead pastor, but she felt called to this ministry and put a confident face forward. Michael, the church chair, promised to help walk her through the first year, till she had her feet under her.

Michael set up regular meetings to talk with Jennifer about the congregation and her ministry, and how she was being received. Michael spent a lot of time at the church. His wife Becky was a bit jealous of how much time he was putting into the church council position, but he reassured her saying it was necessary, he was just making sure that Jennifer had a good start.

Michael and his wife Becky had been going through some hard times in their marriage. It was natural for Michael to eventually mention this to his pastor, Jennifer. She felt a bit out of her depth, but listened compassionately to the painful story he shared. He wrote her a number of late night emails after fights with Becky, venting his frustration and anger. Some of the emails referred to sexual problems that he and Becky were having.

One summer morning, instead of sitting inside the stuffy building for their meeting, Michael suggested they find a nicer place to meet. They ended up driving to the beach, where they opened the windows and talked about their church business there, watching the waves.

The following week Jennifer was shocked when she got a call from her conference minister, Pastor Richard Whitfield. He had received an informal complaint that Jennifer was crossing boundaries with a congregant.

The church secretary, who was friends with Michael's wife Becky, had talked to Becky about the long meetings Michael and Jennifer were always having. Then a congregant had seen Michael and Jennifer talking intensely at the beach and she phoned Becky about it. The unease Becky had been having in the back of her mind was confirmed, and she decided to have a peek at her husband's emails. She was shocked to read that Jennifer was told sexual details of their marriage. She called the denominational minister, Pastor Richard Whitfield, with her concerns.

Maintaining Boundaries

Pastor Richard Whitfield met with Jennifer to discuss the concerns he had about her relationship with Michael. He reminded Jennifer that maintaining boundaries is always the responsibility of the pastor. He suggested that Jennifer had been wrong in having private email conversations with Michael that included intimate details. He also said it was inappropriate for Jennifer to go to the beach with Michael. They should have stayed in the church where the church secretary was always present. While there was no official complaint against Jennifer, the conference minister wanted to join Jennifer in a meeting with her Pastor Congregation Relations Committee to discuss accountability and boundaries.

Jennifer had been quiet through much of Richard Whitfield's explanation. Then she told her side of the story. Jennifer had felt that she was being micro-managed for quite some time by Michael, but he was her church chair, and she didn't know how to respond to that. When he started talking about his marriage problems, she had soon referred him to a local counsellor, telling him that she felt uncomfortable talking about sexual topics with him. But Michael persisted in randomly including personal comments in emails about church business. She offered to give Pastor Whitfield a printout of their correspondence if he wanted to see.

She explained that last week Michael had suggested they go to a local ice cream shop for their meeting, and as this was a public setting, she had agreed. But he had instead gone through the drive-through and taken her to the beach. It wasn't what she had agreed to, but she didn't know how to get out of the awkward situation.

Furthermore, Michael had been telling Jennifer that people were unhappy with her preaching and that he was defending her. He implied that his support was staving off a pastoral review. And then over the past month several times he had reached out and touched her braided hair, and once had stroked her neck. She felt very uncomfortable with this and would jump up and leave the room, which would make Michael laugh. She didn't know how to address this. Michael was a very powerful person in the church. She didn't know if people would believe her if she said what was happening. She didn't want to lose her job.

Who is Being Tempted?

“For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain” (I Thessalonians 3:5).

Pastor Whitfield came to Lakeside Beach Church hoping to prevent pastoral misconduct from occurring. He was worried that Jennifer was getting enmeshed with a congregant in an inappropriate and unhealthy way. He wanted to go through the sexual misconduct policy with her and equip her to be more careful about boundaries.

After listening to Jennifer's story, Pastor Whitfield wondered whether the situation was more complicated. Maybe Jennifer was also being sexually harassed by her church council chair. Perhaps Michael was tempted to use his power as the main liaison in the church to coerce or threaten Jennifer.

Pastor Whitfield faced his own temptations. He had gone to college with Michael, and Michael knew some very uncomfortable and unsavoury stories from Pastor Whitfield's past that he didn't particularly want anyone to know. Would pursuing this investigation prompt Michael to talk about the past with others? Pastor Whitfield is tempted to ignore Jennifer's side of the story in order to let sleeping dogs lie.

More temptations surface, this time for the congregation. Pastor Whitfield does speak with the church council and recommends that an investigation is needed. This is complicated by the fact that the church does not have a sexual harassment policy. Will the church be able to resist the temptation of minimizing what is happening and sweeping it under the rug? Will they manage to treat both Jennifer and Michael fairly, taking into account the complicated power dynamics in this situation?

12. Walking Through an Investigation

Pastor Charlie had been serving as senior pastor at Gilead Fellowship for 15 years and his ministry was generally well received. When Pastor Charlie submitted his resignation because he decided to enter early retirement, the church held a farewell party and gave him a great send-off.

The interim pastor hired to replace Pastor Charlie found out about the boundary crossing in a pastoral visit with Vince, one of the long-time congregants. "My wife Marta has been unhappy for a few years," Vince began, "but this week she asked for a divorce. I asked her if there was someone else, and initially she said there wasn't. But she finally admitted that she has been having an affair with Pastor Charlie for the past two years." Vince broke down in tears at this point.

The interim pastor was himself in a state of shock. He had no idea that the previous minister had crossed a sexual boundary with a congregant. His mind was reeling, what should he do with this information? He asked permission from Vince. "This is very troubling news for you personally and frankly, for our congregation as well. Are you comfortable with me sharing this confidentially at our church board meeting tomorrow, to talk about how to respond?"

Vince replied, "I think you can share it with anyone because soon everyone will know. Marta is moving in with Pastor Charlie in a few weeks."

First Steps

The interim pastor wasn't sure how to proceed, and neither was the church board, when he shared the concern with them. They had a sexual misconduct policy, but they had not received an official complaint, and besides, Pastor Charlie was no longer working for them. They thought, though, that Pastor Charlie was still credentialed through their denomination as he did interim preaching at a church he was attending in a nearby town. They decided to ask for help from their denominational office.

A regional minister came to a special church board meeting, after which he met separately with Pastor Charlie, with Marta and with Vince. Pastor Charlie explained that he had fallen in love

with Marta. He had refrained from getting involved sexually until after his resignation, so he felt he had maintained his boundaries. Marta said that it was true love, and that God had brought Charlie into her life as a blessing after a very long unhappy marriage.

Vince, meanwhile, was beginning to feel very angry at Pastor Charlie for betraying his trust: “I can’t believe my own pastor was stealing my wife away from me!” Vince told the regional minister that he wanted to write a formal complaint against Pastor Charlie.

When the complaint was received, the regional minister informed Pastor Charlie that there would be an investigation into his credentials. Pastor Charlie was very upset about this and said that he didn’t want to keep his credentials anyway. The regional minister said that regardless of whether or not Charlie gave up his credentials the investigation was still going to happen, with or without his co-operation. The alleged misconduct had happened when Charlie was employed and credentialed, and the denomination needed to investigate. He encouraged Charlie to participate. The regional minister also offered to provide a support group for Charlie composed of several colleagues, which Charlie was happy to receive.

The regional minister also informed Marta about the investigation. She was very upset about this as well, protesting that Pastor Charlie had done nothing wrong. They had simply fallen in love.

The regional minister also met with Vince. The regional minister explained to each of the individuals involved, and to the church board, what they could expect with the investigative process. He also recommended that the church provide support people for Marta and Vince.

Meanwhile, in a special meeting after a Sunday worship, the regional minister informed the church that there was going to be a sexual misconduct investigation of their former pastor. The regional minister also said that if anyone had further information about misconduct, they should talk to the investigative team. He closed the meeting with prayer. The congregation was very upset and soon many rumours were swirling as people began speculating what might have happened.

The Investigation

It took several weeks before the outside investigative team that the denomination put together could be organized to meet with all the parties involved. They interviewed Charlie, Marta and Vince. While Charlie said that he had no sexual contact with Marta while he was pastor, he did admit that they were romantically attracted to each other and they did share some kisses. Marta was adamant that she had entered this relationship entirely voluntarily. Charlie was so easy to talk to and their relationship just gradually evolved into something more intense. She was clearer about when their relationship had become physical. She said that it had started at a church conference she had attended with Charlie a year earlier.

While Charlie and Marta were bothered by the investigation, mostly they were happily involved in their new relationship. Vince, however, was broken and bitter and explained at length to the investigators about how betrayed he felt. “Shouldn’t you be able to trust your own pastor not to hit on your wife? I would never have let her spend time with him if I knew this was what was

going on. And what about me? Did he ever think about my needs? How was he my pastor?" The regional minister arranged for counselling for Vince.

A week after the investigation happened and before they had written their report, the denominational office received another complaint. It was from another woman in the congregation who had a short but intense romantic relationship with Charlie shortly after Charlie's wife had died. This complainant was also interviewed, and counselling services were offered to her too.

Guarding A Sacred Trust: Healing and Hope

The investigative team found that misconduct had occurred. Charlie was the first to be informed. He did not want to engage with the denominational about counselling and accountability, so his ministerial credentials were revoked. Charlie and Marta never accepted the findings that misconduct had occurred. They saw their relationship as true love and were sorry only that the timing of their relationship hadn't been ideal.

For Vince, the findings of the team validated the deep hurt he was experiencing. By the time a summary of the report was shared with the congregation, Marta and Charlie were living together. The congregation was surprised that a second person had come forward, and there was a lot of private speculation about who that might be. They were terribly disappointed with Charlie and wondered how they missed seeing what was going on. How could they trust their next minister?

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