

Dr. Nils Friberg

Remarks to a church following the fall of their pastor.

First, let me express my sorrowful solidarity with you in your shock, pain, sadness, and disillusionment as a result of the revelations that are going on concerning the practices and attitudes of your former pastor. Let me also affirm that the heart of God is certainly much more sorrowful than my own. He has called us toward righteousness and justice; He hates our sin, but loves the sinner. He is graciously at our side to help us as we struggle forward toward healing and re-structuring our lives and ministry according to His holy will. Through the glory of God is dimmed somewhat by our sinful ways, God's glory will again shine through.

As I see my task, it is one of instruction. God has several times put me in situations where I have needed to help people impacted by sexual misconduct and moral failure of pastoral leaders. I have done some writing about it, and also have suffered the impact of people's horrible pain in my own consciousness. My task of encouragement moves along two main themes:

First, what you are feeling, whether it is feelings of betrayal, disillusionment, mistrust, sorrow, sadness, anger, or hopelessness, these feelings are normal for people in churches where pastoral sexual misconduct has occurred. I am here to tell you that if you feel them, your feelings are normal. You are not going crazy. You have suffered severe impacts upon your sense of who you are as individuals and as a corporate body.

Some of you may have had actual physical reactions, such as headaches, stomachaches, back pain, or other physical symptoms. Your bodies can sometimes tell you what your minds cannot. You have suffered shock and dismay, anger and despair, all mixed together. This affects you deeply and should do so. If one were to say they feel nothing, one could ask how much such a person really cares about this church and its people.

Secondly, I want to encourage you to recognize that there is a variety of reactions to such a situation. Each kind of reaction becomes a part of the whole of what your school and church are going through together. You form a system of people that has a kind of subculture of its own, and its own personality. What each of you does, expresses out loud, as well as the attitudes you form, all become part of the whole. We bear mutual responsibility as we work through our feelings and think about how we are helping and serving one another in processing those feelings. My task of instruction falls along several important lines. I want to (1) describe what pastoral sexual misconduct is, (2) how it affects people, and (3) what we might do about it from this point forward.

What is pastoral sexual misconduct?

“Pastoral sexual misconduct” is the proper terminology. “Having an affair,” does not adequately describe what happens in this kind of setting. “Affair” is applicable to only one portion of what has happened. This phrase focuses on adultery. There is a larger arena of misconduct; however, that needs to be included here. The State of Minnesota statutes would not likely have declared such misconduct a felony if it simply involved “an affair.”

This is why, when any professional (whether a social worker, teacher, physician, attorney, counselor, or clergy person), accepts the role of being a helper to people who are struggling, they take on an ethical responsibility for the safety and well-being of the persons they serve. By definition, the person coming for help feels somewhat dependent upon the helper; they are asking the helper to guide and instruct them toward the solution of some serious issues in their life.

Each of us has a personal boundary, a kind of special space that we call our own. When we ask someone for help at a very personal and intimate area of our spiritual and mental life, to some degree, we let down the fences around that personal space. This is normal and right for the process of helping to occur. However, the professional is always, both ethically and legally, responsible to guard the boundaries of safety for the person they are helping. No matter how the client or patient or counselee acts or feels, the professional is responsible to see that the helped is safe in the helper's presence. Confidentiality, true respect for that person's reputation and person, is a part of this safety zone.

Therefore, a person who is under the leadership, guidance, or helping action of a professional cannot give absolute, clear, mutual consent to an invitation to become sexually involved with that professional. Not that the client is helpless or totally debilitated, but simply more trusting and dependent than normally would be the case.

People who are under our influential leadership are not completely free to give mutual consent to any serious decision, because of the different level of power exerted by leadership. Even in the case of an elected lay leader of some prominence in the church, I would question whether persons under their leadership can give completely free mutual consent to serious involvement with them. Sexual misconduct victims often speak of the huge control and power that was exerted upon them by this combination of factors: their own neediness, the dependence, the trust, and the gradual awareness that they were being used by the helper. The professional who ignores this significant differential of influence and power does so at his/her own risk, and certainly at the risk of those being helped.

Therefore, when anyone comes under the sway of a pastor, and becomes involved sexually with that pastor, the person is to be considered victimized, not collusive or cooperative, or on an equal footing with the pastor in terms of responsibility for what developed. Let us take special care not to blame or re-victimize such persons by the way we treat them now. These persons go into the helping process with open hearts and minds, and are raped while in a state of weakness, confusion, or special neediness.

This is extremely important in terms of the way we treat the victimized person. They are already struggling with serious issues of self-worth, pain, and betrayal by the professional who has abused them. Let us not add to their already significant burden by heaping more guilt or blame upon them. It may surprise some of you to hear me say that this is more an issue of power than of sexuality. But I immediately respond that it is very biblical to speak this way.

Go to II Samuel 11 and 12 to read how the Lord dealt with David's sin; God sent Nathan to speak a parable to David. Reread the parable itself. There's not a hint in the parable about sexuality. It is all about the abuse of power. David had enormous power; Uriah and Bathsheba did not. David used his power abusively and selfishly. For this, God brought judgment upon him. Nathan's parable teaches us that power was more crucial than the sexuality. Even though adultery is terribly wrong, abuse of power is an even greater wrong, and is the central, crucial wrong.

Pastors, leaders, politicians, policemen, judges, and all of the rest of us need to work through our learning of how to use power.

How does pastoral sexual misconduct affect people?

Our grief is shaped by the kind of relationship we have lost and its meaning to us.

So, with pastoral sexual misconduct, the impact of the misconduct is determined by the kind of relationship we had with the pastor, and the meaning it held for us. Let us be more specific.

Church members usually invest a great deal of trust and confidence in a pastor. This is called "fiduciary trust." For example, we deliver our children into the hands of a pastor for instructional classes; we ask them to help our children with preparation for baptism or to provide vocational guidance. We do so because we believe that this person is not only educated and spiritually wise, but also trustworthy of all our confidence in him or her. When we stand in our congregation, being led in worship by a pastor or leader, that leader's own *persona* points us to the holy, and inspires us to give devotion and love to the Lord. Under this person's leadership and teaching, we have experienced calls to conversation, to deeper Christian walk, to prayer, to obedience, to consecration to God. This person has led us into the holy of holies of our lives and of God.

When that person abuses power, or can no longer be trusted to exercise total respect and honor of everyone who trusts him or her, we feel betrayed, and we immediately lose all confidence in spiritual leaders. We then react violently against their leadership role in our lives.

We may take an earthy view of their humanness, and that helps to some degree; yet, in the long run, we cannot feel the same inspiration about them being able to lead us to God, or to help us walk with God. Some of us may even question God and God's care and providence over us when our leader falls. This is what some of you may be feeling right now. Indeed, it takes a great deal of readjusting of our inner self to pick up the pieces and invest trust again in a new leader or pastor. This can be built again, but may take time; especially for people who have been previously wounded by leadership people or even by parental abuses.

There is also what I might term the geographical impact of abuse. Holy places and spaces become contaminated for us by the memory of abuses that occurred there. I know of churches that have held special ceremonies of cleansing and rededication of altars, pulpits, offices or vestments. People who have had their wedding ceremony performed in the sanctuary, or a loved one's funeral or their children baptized or dedicated there, may struggle with this perception of contamination. If there are those in your congregation who struggle with these feelings, pay attention to this phenomenon, and think seriously about the need for rededication of spaces and places.

More subtle, but just as real, is the feeling that our loyalties to our church and school are now compromised by this act of sexual misconduct. The community is reacting with clucking tongues and probably is somewhat judgmental about this event. The press has carried the news far and wide. Our reputation is sullied. Our sense of pride and place in the community has been injured. We become confused about our loyalties and identity as individuals and as a corporate body. It is deeply disturbing and injurious to suffer this kind of loss. Our whole spiritual history as persons and as a church has been besmirched.

Our struggle to live out the Gospel and to share our witness for Christ in the community has become much more difficult. Some people will scoff at our Christ and our church. This hurts us deeply, and we writhe in spiritual and emotional agony over this loss. People demand explanations which are especially difficult to give without our becoming defensive. We react: "I didn't bring this on – why should I have to suffer so many consequences of another's actions?"

The biggest concern we often feel in such situations is for the impact all of this has had upon our children. If our leader falls, then how can we urge them to trust the God these leaders represent? As an eighteen-year-old, I experienced a spiritual crisis of my own

when leaders in my home church in Oregon went terribly astray in behavior and morality. My wife had a similar experience as a teen member of a church in Minnesota. We have both recovered well, but not everyone does.

It is already hard enough to lead our children to a meaningful and deeply personal faith that will endure throughout their lifetime, without having to confront situations like this one. People throw this up at us in the strangest ways. One time, as a police chaplain, I went in with officers on a domestic dispute where a man had beaten his wife. This was soon after the Jimmy Baker and Jimmy Swaggert debacles. The husband saw my ID badge as a chaplain, and said: "Out of my house, you hypocrite!" My reaction: "Who's beating his wife here – you or me?"

However, our children will respect openness, honesty and a demonstration of clear and sincere dependence upon the grace of God to heal and restore us to strong and vibrant faith. My father was open, honest, and humbly dependent on God throughout the situation in our home church, and this moved me to follow Christ more firmly than ever. Let us all try to be such examples and guides to our children and youth in days to come.

There are many victims in such a situation as this: the primary victims have suffered the direct abuse of the pastoral person and role. The secondary victims are the family members touched by the abuse; husbands, wives, children, and extended family members. The circle of victims includes members of the church, youth, children, people who were earnestly seeking to find faith in Christ. All of these are victimized. The circles of concern go out further and further, into the local state, and national community. The ripples of victimization overwhelm us. Even people in leadership of the church and school are victimized since they are left to deal with all the fall-out; situations they did not create themselves, but nevertheless are forced to manage.

Another victim in this whole scene is the new pastor who follows the misconduct. The mistrust in leadership, the painful feelings that are in the process of being expressed, dealt with and slowly healed. The piecing together of new loyalties and trusting relationships all take a long time and is extremely trying for the new pastor. Feelings come seeping out of the woodwork, and do so in crazy ways that confuse and confound the new pastor. It is hard for the new pastor of a church to follow a pastor who was here for twenty-one years. Many church authorities say that a pastor who follows someone with such a long tenure should consider themselves to be only an interim pastor, since so many adjustments will need to be made by the congregation to the new style and methods of the after-pastor. But, if you add the crazy-making effect of sexual misconduct by the former pastor, the situation becomes more difficult. Please remember and consider these factors, and be much in prayer, checking your own attitude toward the new pastor in the light of this reality. Allow the new pastor to develop his own ministry, to exercise his own gifts, to find his own way in ministry to this community.

Bless his efforts, encourage him, and sustain him with supportive prayer; filling in with supportive help where he has weaknesses, and cheering him in his strengths.

How should a congregation respond?

I am not telling you here how to make corporate decisions that need to be made. I am focusing upon the pastoral care needs of this faith community.

First, we need to recognize that the legal process that is under way will bring only limited satisfaction, if any, and perhaps more complications than solutions. The legal system does some things well, but one thing it does not do well is to heal bad feelings and release us to healing. In fact, often the adversarial legal process raises more pain and struggles for us than we anticipated. Anyone who has been involved in the civil and criminal courts knows this gut-wrenching truth well.

Secondly, we need a great deal of special grace from God to deal with ourselves and with each other in the long process of healing. Each person is reacting and feeling things that are peculiar to his/her particular person with his/her history, experience, level of maturity and spiritual resources. We need a great deal of patience and long-suffering to allow for these variations on the theme of “we hurt and need to heal.”

We need to recognize that some of the energy that goes into seeking to lay special responsibility and blame on people for what happened is often fueled by our own confused pain and discomfort with it. On a daily basis each of us needs to bring our awareness of our pain and wounds to God, to deal with them in prayerful dependence upon the Spirit of God, to confess them in small groups of friends and colleagues, and to pray for each other. If you need to get special, professional help to deal with your feelings, do that. That is not a sign of weakness, but a realistic view of human nature. Treat your struggle like you would treat a serious grief over a very significant loss in your life. Know that grief comes and goes in waves, and is not totally under our own control. Our grieving cycles will criss-cross with the cycles of others in our congregation and school. Know that this is a realistic view of the long process ahead of us. This makes life very complicated and trying but with God’s help and enduring patience with each other, we can move through this to better days ahead.

Allow for complications that come with the harshness of the legal processes, and the fear and unrest that come with them. Rather than taking sides against each other, recognize that you all have a deep need to be encouraged, nurtured, and supported during these tough times. Dealing with fears and mistrust is more important than being “right” about a particular court issue. If we do not keep this in focus, our congregation will be split into factions and possibly be destroyed. We are to be here for each other, with God’s help.

Allow for mixed feelings about changes that a new pastor will bring about. He will, as I have already said, be laboring under a huge deficit. Be careful not to allow your mistrust, anger, and despair to get mixed into the way you treat him and his ideas. Allow him to have his unique and God-gifted ministry. When you feel negative feelings about him or his ideas, stop and ask: "Am I reacting to him, or am I still dealing with the past wounds?"

We need to pray constantly in the days ahead for all who have been victimized by this series of acts and all of its consequences. This includes prayer for you, of course, but as I have described the wide circle of affected people, we have an obligations to think and prayer for all of them. Hold firmly to the attitude of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3: 20 -21: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen."

