

INTRODUCTION



Imagine a church served by a beloved rector. Everyone knows and trusts everyone else. Members describe the congregation as “one big happy family.” Last week the rector was involved in a serious car accident. He veered off the road and hit a utility pole on his way home from a restaurant. When police and medics arrived they immediately realized that the rector was intoxicated. The rector is in the hospital recovering from his injuries and will likely be there for another week.

Generally, members are shocked and saddened. They want to know when their rector will return to them and how they can care for him in the meantime. The wardens are not completely surprised. They knew that things weren’t going so well. On five previous occasions the wardens were called to come and get the rector from the same restaurant about forty-five minutes out of town; he was too intoxicated to drive. On three of these occasions, he was with a woman from the congregation who was recently widowed. The rector had ministered to her and her husband as he was dying. She is now keeping vigil by the rector’s side at the hospital. She intends to care for him in her home upon his discharge from the hospital and indicates, “He practically lives with me.”

Since the rector’s hospitalization, the wardens, bookkeeper, and church administrator have tried to make sense of the rector’s record-keeping. They have discovered that the parish register has not been updated since the bishop’s last visitation. When the wardens review a bank statement for the rector’s discretionary fund they become concerned, as large amounts of money seem to be flowing through this fund. Their concern has grown as they learn that the bookkeeper has had nothing to do with the discretionary fund, the rector has handled it all, checks have been made out to cash, and the fund has not been audited.

On top of this, a member of the local press called a warden to ask for a comment regarding the rector. During this call the warden learned that the police plan to arrest the rector for driving while intoxicated. The bishop has informed the wardens that when the rector is discharged from the hospital, he will not return to serve in the parish. The rector will need to focus on his well being, attend to criminal proceedings in secular court, and perhaps attend to ecclesiastical disciplinary proceedings.

Members are experiencing a wide range of reactions. Some are angry with the wardens for not having intervened sooner; if they had, the rector could have been spared this recent tragic event. Some are angry with the woman whose husband just died; she should have known that the rector was in a vulnerable state and should not have risked tarnishing his reputation by being seen with him. Some are sad because they believed their church to be perfect—at least one big happy family—and now that image of the church is lost. Some are pooling their funds to pay for the rector’s legal expenses, and some are angry with the bishop for taking away their beloved rector and being so “un-pastoral” by not letting the rector return to them in his time of need.

As the week progresses, members are becoming more and more anxious. A number of members are beginning to treat each other harshly. Longtime friends who supported each other through life’s challenges cannot support each other now; they find themselves on opposite sides of this situation. Relationships among members are becoming frayed. A few vestry members have resigned because they are so angry with the bishop that they don’t want to be part of the church. Interestingly, not many members seem to be angry with the rector—he appears to be the victim in all this. Others are ostracizing the few who are angry with the rector.

This fictitious story may seem extreme, but it is not farfetched. When a congregational leader crosses boundaries, often more than one type of boundary is crossed. Unfortunately, our imaginary rector is in deep trouble—in so many ways. He may be involved in a sexualized relationship with a parishioner. He may have embezzled funds. Moreover, he appears to have a problematic relationship with alcohol and will likely face criminal charges in secular court for driving

under the influence. While this story is fictitious, all other scenarios and examples found in these pages are based on real events. Many are amalgams of actual events from congregations across the Church. It is likely that you, the reader, are aware of even more episodes that illustrate the dynamics of misconduct in a congregation.

Almost everyone, whether they attend a church or not, is familiar with instances of misconduct in a church. Consider the following examples: an elected lay leader embezzles church funds to pay for a vacation house and cars for her family; this continues for years before it is detected. A longtime church musician is arrested, convicted, and incarcerated for sexual abuse of children; during his tenure he took youth choirs on international concert tours. A married priest has “an affair”¹ with a recently divorced woman in his congregation; he ministered to her throughout the breakdown of her marriage. A senior warden offers to provide childcare so parents can volunteer at a church function; while trusted with their care, he sexually abuses the children. A respected rector makes romantic overtures to numerous women in his parish and over a dozen of these overtures become fully sexualized relationships while the rector continues to serve the parish. An older priest sexualizes a relationship with a young woman who sought pastoral care and support after the death of her father. A rector uses sexually explicit language during confirmation classes and sexually abuses an adolescent male in the class.

What do all of these examples have in common? A lay or ordained leader has betrayed the trust of a congregation. The leader’s persona and position of authority in the church engendered trust, which the leader betrayed by putting his or her own needs before those of the congregation’s members. While some congregational misconduct violates secular law, the effects of misconduct can be devastating even if secular law is not violated.

1. “Affair” generally connotes a sexualized relationship between two consenting adults. This is not an accurate description of a sexualized relationship between an ordained leader and an individual to whom he or she ministers. The disparity of power between the two individuals diminishes, if not completely negates, the ability of the recipient of ministry to voluntarily consent to a sexualized relationship. For further information and training materials on preventing the exploitation of adults in congregations, see www.cpg.org/productsservices/preventingsexualabuse.cfm.

The fallout from misconduct in a congregation can be devastating to both individual members and the congregation as a community. Restoring trust in oneself, other parishioners, and even God, is difficult work that can be guided, nurtured, and supported by congregational and judicatory leaders. A path toward healing and wholeness for individual members and the congregation is set out in the chapters that follow.

WHY THIS BOOK?

The goal of this book is to offer information and practical step-by-step suggestions to facilitate effective responses to misconduct in congregations. The information and suggestions have been informed, developed, and tested while serving on diocesan staff for the Episcopal Church in Connecticut since 2000. During this time there have been a number of congregations experiencing and struggling with the aftermath of misconduct by ordained and lay leaders. In some congregations the misconduct occurred long before I began to serve on diocesan staff, and yet the effects were still palpable.

My intention is to offer tools that can be used by any denomination to build up Christian communities of faith—the Body of Christ. Caring and supporting those who are directly impacted by misconduct—primary victims and those who offend—is important; however, it is equally important to care and support all members of a congregation. It is through this work that members learn to confront their own reactions to misconduct, minister to one another, acknowledge any harm they may have caused others, restore trust with one another, and reconcile relationships with others in the congregation. Doing this work equips members to engage in God’s mission of restoration and reconciliation in other settings. This is the work we, as the Church, are called to do. And while it is unclear what our Church will look like in the future, it is clear that healthy Christian communities will continue to be essential in the formation of disciples.

If any of what is within these pages causes distress to anyone who was victimized or impacted by misconduct in a congregation, I apologize for the harm caused by my words and ask your forgiveness. I have sought to treat those who were victimized and those

who offend with dignity and respect, while attempting to convey the importance and intricacies of caring for all members of congregations in the wake of misconduct.²

LANGUAGE

Throughout this book I use the term *offender* to refer to the person who abused power and violated another, or who is alleged to have violated another. For readability, I did not insert the word “alleged” every time it could be inserted. The offender can be either an ordained or lay leader.

For readability, I use the word *victim* to refer to individuals who were injured, harmed, or wronged by an ordained or lay leader. My use of this word is not meant to imply that any individual is weak, helpless, passive, or powerless. On the contrary, the stories shared in this book are those of victims of misconduct who took action to seek healing for themselves, accountability for the offender, and are survivors of misconduct. The phrase *primary victim(s)* refers to the individual(s) directly impacted/violated by an offender in a congregation, for example, the parishioner with whom the rector engages in a sexualized relationship or the child sexually abused by the choir-master. Typically, all members of a faith community are impacted by misconduct and are *secondary victims*.

I have intentionally refrained from using of the word “reconciliation” in descriptions of processes to restore trust in congregations. For many primary victims, offenders, and members of congregations, using the word reconciliation in the wake of misconduct triggers incorrect assumptions—that they are being asked to forgive, forget, and become friends again with those who hurt them. While this could be seen as a teachable moment, it is counterproductive to try to teach the theology of reconciliation when people are in the midst of suffering and understandably strong emotional responses. This teaching may be possible when members have moved through much of the healing and restoration process, but can detract from the critical issues that need to be addressed in the immediate wake of misconduct.

2. Chapter 11 is devoted to the care and support of primary victims and offenders.

MISCONDUCT BY LAYPERSONS

When I joined the staff of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, my role was primarily to assist when there were allegations of clergy misconduct. I soon learned that lay leaders also engage in misconduct; in some cases, the impact on the congregation was far greater than if a rector had engaged in the same behavior. Long-serving staff members, or individuals and families who have a lock on parish leadership (often for generations), can amass more power and trust within the parish system than a rector. Betrayal of trust by a lay leader can be devastating to a congregation.

Examples and responses to lay misconduct are provided. Almost all processes described in this book, even if they only refer to clergy misconduct, can be modified to respond to lay misconduct. While the disciplinary canons of the Episcopal Church do not apply to lay misconduct, within the confines of diocesan canons a disciplinary process for lay misconduct can be created. The ecclesiastical authority for such a process is typically the rector.

DISCIPLINARY CANONS IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

As of the writing of this book, the disciplinary process for clergy in the Episcopal Church is set out in Title IV of the Canons. These canons were significantly changed at General Convention in 2009 and modified in 2012. The significant changes, which went into effect as of July 1, 2011, shifted the disciplinary process from one of retributive justice (based on military law) to a process based on restorative justice, more closely aligned with our call as Christians. It is likely that these canons will be revised at subsequent General Conventions as our experiences with disciplinary proceedings become more informed over time.

This book is not a guide to the canonical disciplinary processes and should not be relied on as such.³ Rather, it is a guide to working with congregations to restore trust in the wake of misconduct. References to canons are included in boxes within the text where

3. For training materials on the disciplinary processes and proceedings set out in Title IV, consult the website for the Episcopal Church in Connecticut at www.episcopalct.org.

canons directly address this work. The content of this book, which focuses on human reactions and dynamics in congregations, will remain valid and relevant even if the canons undergo another significant revision.⁴

OTHER DENOMINATIONS

Although written with a focus on the Episcopal Church, this book addresses congregational dynamics and the work to restore trust among those impacted by misconduct. These human dynamics are universal regardless of a congregation's denomination. The processes set out can be translated for use by judicatory and/or congregational leaders in other denominations. Some processes may need to be modified to reflect differences in polity.

For those unfamiliar with the structure and roles in Episcopal congregations, a brief description of some of the key terminology used throughout this book follows. A congregation in the Episcopal Church is referred to as a *parish*, *congregation*, or *mission*. Parishes within a proscribed geographic area are connected to each other to form a *diocese*. Ordained and lay leaders in each diocese elect a *bishop*—the judicatory leader. The bishop is charged with the care of clergy and congregations, and has specific responsibility and authority within the canonical disciplinary process.

Parish leadership generally consists of a *rector*, an ordained leader called to serve a congregation. This is a tenured position.⁵ The *wardens* are lay leaders, elected by members to serve the congregation. There are two wardens who are among the officers of the parish. In the absence of ordained leadership, the responsibility of running the day-to-day life of the parish is the wardens'. A *vestry* is a group of lay leaders elected by members of the parish to lead the parish with the ordained leader. Among other things, a vestry has responsibility for budgeting and overseeing the funds of the church.

4. At the time of this writing, there is no indication that the disciplinary canons will undergo a significant revision.

5. Some churches have an *interim rector*, *vicar*, or *priest-in-charge* instead of a rector. These are ordained leadership roles that do not have tenure.

The *chancellor* is the bishop's attorney. One of the chancellor's roles is to counsel the bishop and seek to protect the legal interests of the judicatory. A *parish attorney* is an attorney, who may or may not be a member of the parish, who counsels parish leaders and seeks to protect the legal interests of the parish. The chancellor and parish attorney are two separate roles; they cannot be served by the same person.

BLESSINGS AND CALL

As Christians we are called to share the love of Christ and work to reconcile the brokenness of this world. Brokenness exists, on many levels, in the wake of misconduct. The work of accompanying and shepherding congregations through processes to restore trust is hard work; it takes stamina, faith, perseverance, and emotional and spiritual health.

This work is best approached as a form of art, rather than a formulaic process. It reflects a kind of dance between following the steps of appropriately tailored processes and making room for the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, through whom the real work of restoration and transformation is possible. The blessing of accompanying and shepherding congregations in the wake of misconduct is a privilege. It is an honor, and humbling, to be present in the midst of pain and brokenness, and to witness holy moments of transformation. I pray that all who engage in this work will recognize the blessings in the midst of the challenges.

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