

The Road to Hell is paved...

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A response to Matthew Johnson's paper on ministerial sexual misconduct

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Kudos to Matthew for handling a topic that is difficult both personally and professionally with candor and grace. Thank you for an excellent paper, and for getting us started on an important but difficult conversation. We have a special opportunity here today to examine the log in our own eye rather than the speck in the eye of another.

I find it helpful to engage papers as an outline of ideas, so I offer this brief outline of the paper as an aid to our conversation. Matthew begins by sharing his professional experience of confusing dynamics in the congregation he serves and his struggle to find answers to his questions. He then delves into analysis:

- I. Philosophical arguments about morality,
 - a. Kant's categorical imperative and Utilitarianism do not take up relational context.
 - b. Aristotle's concept of virtue ethics provides a relational context that serves as a grounding for our understanding of the congregational context as worthy of special consideration.
- II. The fiduciary and spiritual role of the minister requires clear boundaries--with supporting quotes from Stephens and Pope-Lance.
- III. The reality of the relational context complicates the picture.
 - a. We can romanticize the story to "stand on the side of love."
 - b. While there may be power issues, power is malleable from situation to situation and may not be the main issue.
 - c. Stephens and Pope-Lance identify sexual behavior in the congregation as always a violation of role.
- IV. Relational context allows for narrative, which may be manipulative.
 - a. Narratives on this issue have tended to focus on the minister and the justifications, rather than on the congregant and the congregation and consequences.
 - b. Would it help to keep the virtue ethics of relational context but keep the narrative firmly centered in the story of the congregant and the congregation? (using examples of the scope of the issue and personal narratives of abuse.)
 - c. This re-centering of the narrative helps to identify the narcissism of the minister-centered story.
 - d. Narcissism seeps into many smaller acts and confuses the dynamics considerably and often for years to come.
- V. Healthy congregations have an important role to play in establishing and maintaining good boundaries.
 - a. Clergy must monitor their own needs and behavior, and congregations also should monitor congregational behavior.
 - b. This will help keep the narrative about the congregation, not the minister.
- VI. Spiritual immaturity occurs in the culture, our congregants, and in ourselves.
 - a. Looking for power & authority can lead to a need to control, and mentors, colleagues, & congregations must continually be clear that the need to control is spiritually bankrupt.

- b. Congregations that do not respect legitimate human needs—who reward enmeshment and overwork—often end up with violating ministers.
 - c. All humans have difficulty meeting intimacy needs, but our role makes it easy for us to cross those boundaries (supported with personal example of temptation & a responsible response.)
- VII. Misconduct is “sin” because meeting our intimacy needs or indulging our need for power objectifies others.
- a. Wherever objectification occurs, big or small, by us or our congregants, it is sin.
 - b. When we see it in ourselves in small ways, it is time to have a conversation to keep it from getting more serious.
 - c. Categorical imperative: Don’t steal from or have sex with those you are called to serve.
- VIII. Self-reliance is another sin; if we eschew this sin and truly rely on one another, we can keep ourselves out of most of the danger of sexual misconduct.

Overall, my take is that Matthew’s conclusions are that navigating sexual relationships is difficult for everyone, ministry is a special circumstance worthy of more stringent rules precisely because there is a spiritual relationship with our congregants that exists no matter what. Misconduct is a “sin” because it betrays our ministerial role and betrays relationships from the point of view of the congregant and/or congregation. The only way to get around the narcissism trap is to keep the narrative firmly on the congregation as a whole, and to rely on one another to help us recognize small acts of narcissism before they become big.

I would like to add some comments about the issue of self-justification. There are several reasons why I believe self-justification plays a mind-bogglingly huge role in the area of misconduct. Stephens¹ mentions the reality of dual relationships in ministry, but does not develop this theme much. However, the very nature of our role as ministers is founded on dual relationships. We are not counselors or doctors or lawyers who can be excused for being distantly polite when meeting a client or patient in social circumstances. We are expected to inspire and move people in worship, to work with congregants on teams and assist volunteer or paid staff members, to counsel them in times of stress, and to engage in small talk and storytelling at social events. We are expected to share personal details of our lives in sermons while lifting the entire message to a spiritual level that uplifts a whole congregation. That finance committee member may be a real pain in the ass about the budget, but she still may suddenly need grief counseling. The Board member who is really smart, insightful, diplomatic, and who has never asked for pastoral care may also have much in common with us on many personal levels. Can we or should we deny a naturally occurring friendship? The whole thing is one big tangled ball of dual relationships.

What is the difference between being friendly, warm, supportive, self-disclosing of personal matters on the one hand, and being a friend on the other? We know the official answer to this question is whether we are meeting our own needs or the needs of our parishioners (always assuming we spot

¹ Stephens, Darryl W. (2013) “Fiduciary Duty and Sacred Trust”, in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach*, ed. Jung and Stephens. Fortress Press.

the congregant whose needs are to be our “special friend” and nip that in the bud without giving offense). But are the lines really that clear? And when the lines are not clear, the opportunity for self-justification is there.

Self-justification occurs in all areas of our lives and our congregants’ lives. It’s harmful effects have been documented in medicine, psychotherapy, the criminal justice system, and politics, just to name a few. A great resource is the book *Mistakes were Made—but Not by Me*² which steps through some of the more egregious effects of self-justification in our society. How can perfectly ordinary, reasonable people convince themselves of the guilt of someone else in the face of all evidence to the contrary, or on the other hand convince themselves of their own innocence in the face of patently damaging behavior? Tavis and Aronson have studied the phenomenon of self-justification in depth. Here is one small example from their work:

Like Nixon, Lyndon Johnson was a master of self-deception. According to his biographer Robert Caro, “When Johnson came to believe in something, he would believe in it totally, with absolute conviction, regardless of previous beliefs or of the facts in the matter. George Reedy, one of Johnson’s aids, said that he had a remarkable capacity to convince himself that he held the principles he should hold at any given time, and there was something charming about the air of injured innocence with which he would treat anyone who brought forth evidence that he had held other views in the past. It was not an act. He had a fantastic capacity to persuade himself that the truth which was convenient for the present was the truth, and anything that conflicted with it was the prevarication of enemies. He literally willed what was in his mind to become reality.” (7)

Maybe we can convince ourselves that anyone who has the narcissism to believe he or she can be President is likely to be able to self-deceive on a monumental level. However, Tavis and Aronson tell this story of a regular professional guy that might hit a little closer to home:

In 1847, Ignac Semmelweiss famously exhorted his fellow physicians to wash their hands before delivering babies. He realized that they must have acquired some kind of “morbid poison” on their hands from doing autopsies on women who had died of childbed fever, then transferred the poison to women in labor. (He didn’t know the exact mechanism, but he had the right idea.) Semmelweiss ordered his own medical students to wash their hands in a chlorine antiseptic solution, and death rates from childbed fever dropped rapidly thereafter. Yet his colleagues refused to accept Semmelweiss’s concrete evidence, the lower death rate among his own patients.⁸ Why didn’t they embrace Semmelweiss’s discovery immediately, thanking him effusively for finding the reason for so many unnecessary deaths? (8)

For these physicians to have accepted his simple, lifesaving intervention—wash your hands—they would have had to admit that they had been the cause of the deaths of all those women in their care. This was an intolerable realization, for it went straight to the heart of the physicians’ view of themselves as medical experts and wise healers; and so, in essence, they told

² Tavis, Caroll and Aronson, Elliot. (2008) *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Semmelweiss to get lost and take his stupid ideas with him. Because their stubborn refusal to accept Semmelweiss's evidence—the lower death rate among his own patients—happened long before the era of malpractice suits, we can say with assurance that they were acting out of a need to protect their egos, not their income. Medicine has advanced since their day, but the need for self-justification hasn't budged. (102)

While we may consider Presidents, doctors, or police officers who use self-deception as particularly damaging to society, Tavis and Aronson claim with abundant support from social science research that we can all go down a damaging road of self-deception—one small step at a time. As ministers, we are perhaps already a couple of steps down the road of self-deception and self-justification because of all the dual relationships that are required to do this job.

The frightening thing about self-deception is that most of us who stray into the areas of relationship betrayal, whether small or large, are acting in the real belief that we are doing good things in the world. Self-justification allows us to hold on to these beliefs in the face of huge evidence to the contrary. Ministers who believe that sexual relationships within the church are—or at least were in the “good old days”—harmless fun may have something of the same attitude as the doctors who could not accept that their own practices were leading to women’s deaths. For most of us, self-deception is not an act. It is a necessary protection of our own belief in our goodness. Tavis and Aronson conclude that the only way to work against the harmful effects of self-deception is to talk about it, to learn about how it comes about, to watch for it in ourselves and others. This is pretty much where Matthew ends up. Self-reliance is one of the biggest danger signs for self-deception.

When I entered the ministry, it was not that long after the sexual revolution had given rise to open marriages and casual sex that were the cultural context that allowed so many professionals—more than just ministers—to act in seriously harmful ways toward others while telling themselves “we’re just having a good time.” By 1994 (the year I had one of the first boundary trainings our Association offered) we were far enough into the repercussions of that era to have seen the need for such boundary training that is now required of all new ministers. (Our colleagues in the United Methodist church require ministers to take a refresher course every three or so years.) I was in pretty much the first generation of ministers who received this training as part of seminary. I heard the stories of those who had been harmed before I heard many of the stories of those who just remembered having fun. Over 20 years later, these conversations are still difficult among us, as Matthew documents in his struggle to learn the history of his congregation. Boundary training and conversations such as the one we are having now, in this room, do not guarantee that sinful behavior will not happen among us, but they do give us a precious opportunity to name the pain out loud and to search our own hearts for the justifications and deceptions that may cause our good intentions to go terribly wrong. These conversations are critical. I am grateful for our presence together in this conversation.