

How to Identify Two Negative Predispositions

From Shut Tight

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Two personality predispositions seem to reappear in case after case. Whether churches are uniquely susceptible to these two characteristics and if so, why, can be the subject of much investigation. Here, the two, boundary violators and abusers of power, are simply introduced

Boundary Transgressions

The previous chapter has described leadership problems facing congregations that involved compulsion, narcissism, paranoia, codependency, and passive-aggressive tendencies were discussed. Within the realm of these psychological dynamics, two prominent personality tendencies surface: boundary transgressions and abuse of power (looked at in the next chapter). A good description of boundary transgressions comes from Martin H. Williams who describes such violations of appropriate limits as occurring “when someone knowingly or unknowingly crosses the emotional, physical, spiritual, or sexual limits of another.”[1] Abuse of power is defined as any kind of power—whether physical, sexual, or spiritual—that is used to hurt another.[2] It is important to understand how these two actions contribute to both “puddle” and “cabinet” problems in order to help those who suffer to come to a healing resolution.

The term “boundary transgression” is used primarily in psychotherapy and counseling but has applications in church leadership as well. Expectations and honest desire for friendship, interest, and affection in a church setting can compromise a leader’s appropriate limits with members and deserve attention by the congregation. These deviations from acceptable practices are placed into two categories: boundary crossings and boundary violations. Boundary crossings are minimal departures and include actions like sharing personal information, inappropriate gifts, and non-sexual touching.[3] Boundary violations are stronger breaches and occur when caregivers actually go against, or exploit, the person entrusted to their care or act indecently towards the individual. It is important to acknowledge that such boundaries and potential transgressions can exist even in churches and among church leaders.

Where boundary crossings/violations are clear in counseling contexts, pastors are not counselors licensed by the state; therefore, they are not under the same rules and expectations. Actions officially considered boundary crossings in a counseling setting, such as initiating a hug, can be common and even welcome expressions of affection in church. Pastors and members regularly hug, share personal stories, and give and receive gifts. In fact, these actions often are expected among members in churches described in this paper. Without being aware of it, such natural, accepted, and expected actions can cause church leaders to walk close to the line of boundary violation regularly. Consequently, this project does not use terms like “violations” and “crossings” and instead favors the more appropriate and useful term “boundary transgressions,” using this description: “when someone knowingly or unknowingly crosses the emotional, physical, spiritual, or sexual limits of another.”

When pastors or leaders cross the boundaries of a church member, they violate that relationship, ministry suffers, and the integrity of the church is questioned. The person in relationship with the pastor may be hurt, angry, or confused by the violation even without being able to clearly articulate the breach. The individual may or may not pursue the issue with the pastor. Either way, the relationship is compromised. The ministry suffers when the violation becomes the topic of conversation within the group; or if not discussed, it can be allowed to expand to more people, who benefit less from the ministry. The integrity of the church is questioned if legal avenues are pursued or if rumors spread into the broader church and community. All of these consequences increase if the violation is ignored or hidden and become part of the issues the church does not want to recognize within its “cabinet.” Ultimately, the integrity of the church and its leaders are compromised when such violations occur and are not addressed.

Members, elders, and leaders need to recognize the precarious nature of the leaders in organizations that want and expect expressions of interest and affection that other professionals would consider boundary crossing. By acknowledging the reality of the situation, congregations can establish formal boundaries in the form of policies and expectations about what can, cannot, and must be done in various situations in the church. Having the conversation and developing the policies can help create an environment of awareness. Boundaries clarify where the line of appropriate behavior is and what constitutes violation. Boundary clarification can help prevent the abuse of power associated with boundary violations.

Abuse of Power

Abuse of power is a real occurrence in churches.[4] It causes confusion on the part of victims, can create hurtful silence and indifference, and causes deep wounds that can lead to further problems. When leaders use their authority to coerce or control others, those others can be confused and find it incomprehensible that they were victims. It can be hard for church members who devote hundreds of hours to volunteer church work to understand how the pastor then could take advantage of their devotion without considering their needs. A leader’s abusive actions, silence, and indifference hurt more than the victim. Abuse of power from a church leader hurts the victim, the church, and ultimately the leader as conflict leads to loss of many kinds.

Any kind of power—whether physical, sexual, or spiritual—can be used to hurt another. This is abuse of authority, and it wounds people.[5] Since pastors and church leaders have spiritual authority, they are responsible for wielding it in a healthy way. “Spiritual abuse happens when a leader with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control or exploit a follower, thus causing spiritual wounds.”[6] Abuse of spiritual power contributes to the confusion, silence, and deep wounding that hurts churches.

Abuse of power causes confusion on the part of victims. In healthy environments, power and its use are expected and appreciated. When power is abused, controlled, and manipulated, its victims may not recognize it, can be surprised by it, and even stunned by their own visceral reactions to it. Confusion and lack of ability and knowledge regarding how to respond to abuse of power are recognized by government agencies, which recommend and implement far-reaching community projects to inform and support victims.[7] Abuse of power from church leaders is unexpected and can be dismissed or not believed to be possible by victims. Dupont describes the example of a church staff person. She was a

victim of abusive leaders and said that as difficult as the actions taken against her were, so was her own sense of bewilderment. She had no idea how she, “an intelligent, professional woman,” could have gotten herself involved in so abusive a situation. Confusion by victims contributes to the power of an abusive person. It is common to hear people describe an abusive situation and ask, “Am I crazy?” This sense of disequilibrium among members keeps them from focusing on the actions of the abusive person and keeps them distracted by symptomatic problems, away from true issues.

Uncertainty, fear, distraction, and a sense of powerlessness can create hurtful silence and indifference among fellow leaders. When a victim or supporters break through confusion and seek to address their concerns, if church leaders turn a deaf ear, accuse them of lying, ignore the problem “for the sake of the church,” or try to protect the pastor from necessary consequences, the abuse and wounding increase. In the case of the staff person above, the silence and indifference occurred in church leaders who ignored the efforts of others to come to her defense. The silence was as much an abuse of power as the original attack. In his speech to President Ronald Regan, holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, said, “When there is obvious injustice and principles are violated . . . when your allies find reasons to justify their silence or indifference—neutrality is sin . . . indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor—never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten.” [8] This is the abuse of having one’s injustice ignored by those in power. In churches this can be especially painful, especially when a church community and leaders reject someone for being right about a problem. For this reason, the fear of such rejection can stop members and leaders from opening their “cabinets,” hiding in the kind of neutrality that Wiesel calls “sin”—all of which allow the problems to continue and likely increase.

Power abuse creates deep wounds that can lead to hidden, “cabinet” problems. Abuse of power changes the way people think about what is moral and appropriate. [9] Victims are deprived of fairness. [10] When abusers seek to justify their actions, more evil is created than is prevented. [11] The wounds caused by abuse of power change the victim, the abuser, and the culture of the organization. Far more important than decreases in attendance or membership is the sorrow and loss of members and their loved ones when beloved leaders and churches hurt them. One church staff worker said, “I had no comprehension of the deep and devastating wounding that can occur due to the trauma of spiritual abuse. Now I know. If it happened to me, it can happen to anyone.” This staff person had given of herself passionately and sacrificially to serve her congregation. She was publicly judged and humiliated by the leaders she had served. Such deep wounds lead some to leave the church and others to hide from the problem, both exacerbating the problem and possibly contributing to the wounding of others. Abuse of power and boundary transgressions lead to hidden problems, to good people leaving, and deplete the energy of those who remain. This often leads to the kinds of downward spirals witnessed in churches that face public conflict.