

We Need Healing in Our Church

By Barrington H. Brennen, September 6, 2006

What happens to a church when its members' hopes and dreams have been shattered by the inappropriate behavior of its spiritual leader? What happens to a church when the pastor has caused shame and embarrassment because of rumors of sexual misconduct, financial mismanagement, or has been caught "with his pants down?" Here is the thunderbolt question: What happens to a spiritual leader's spouse when that spouse finds out through rumors or actual evidence, that her/his partner has been sexually involved with someone else or has stolen money from the church? These are painful questions. Even while writing them, it has caused considerable emotional uneasiness; but I have to ask them because I am aware that too many people are being wounded by the ones for whom they have the greatest trust and respect--their pastors. During the past ten years, I have had to deal with numerous cases of sexual and financial infidelity of spiritual leaders and even CEOs. It is painful. It is real.

THEY ARE NOT RUMORS

One story that really saddened me was what a young woman told me ten years ago. Her ex-boyfriend asked her to be his third wife. He was a pastor of an outstanding church, already married with children, and believed that nothing was wrong with having more than one wife at a time. Of course he was planning to keep it a secret from his other wives and church members. Every week he preached with sincerity from the pulpit, impressing Biblical truths on the hearts of his congregants, while his own life was being dictated to by Biblical misinterpretations. What a mess! This young lady was emotionally distraught for months.

Perhaps the saddest story of all was the one I heard from a forty-year-old man who shared with tears his painful past. His father was an outstanding minister of the gospel. He was deeply respected, loved, and honored by all who knew him. Even now, although deceased, people still remember him for his admirable ways and deep spiritual leadership. But that was only in the eyes of the public. In the privacy of his home, the most painful, despicable, and shameful things happened. This "wonderful" spiritual leader, physically, emotionally, and sexually abused all of his five children (girls and boys) and his wife. He raped his daughters and sons many times over a period of ten years. He threatened them not to tell anyone. He had an overpowering presence which he used effectively to get his way. Even his wife of thirty years had to call him "pastor" in the home. When this "wonderful" pastor died, this family's secret was buried with him leaving giant emotional scars and destroyed lives behind.

WHAT HAPPENS?

What happens when the congregation finds out? Hearing about your pastor's sexual misconduct produces responses similar to that of the death of a loved one. Some members go into a state of shock. They become numbed by the reality of the facts placed before them. Others deny, even with the undeniable evidence before them, that their pastor could have done such a thing. These are the misguided loyal members whose own spiritual temperatures are kept warm by the sensational and charismatic leadership of their pastors. There are still others who become disenchanting with the church and leave, never to return.

The painful reality is that when a pastor messes up, the church is greatly affected. Often factions develop, polarizing members on different sides of the story. Sometimes there are long, bitter arguments, and even physical confrontations. Then finally, the membership dwindles leaving only the “faithful few.” Individuals may experience sleepless nights, depression, anxiety, loss of appetite, anger, and deep sadness. Yes, when a pastor violates his/her members’ trust, personal lives are changed.

WHAT TO DO?

When a pastor is guilty of sexual misconduct, it is imperative that redemptive and healing avenues be put in place. If the pastor admits to his guilt, then it is a little easier to face the challenges ahead. To whom should the pastor admit his guilt? To the congregation whose trust he has violated. He need not explain all the private details, but it is important to state all that is necessary to answer the questions and to lift further suspicion. Doing this will also benefit the guilty pastor. For years he fooled everyone. It was a secret. Now it is open to all, thus creating an important level of accountability which is the first step toward healing.

It is also important that church leadership (not the pastor) meet with the congregation to allow them to ask questions, express their anger, pain, and frustration and most of all to pray together. This is a time to pray. Often having a psychologist or a trained mediator in the meeting is beneficial. The prayers must be genuine ones that ask God for wisdom and guidance in the matter. **Return next week as I continue on more of what to do. Barrington H. Brennen is a marriage and family therapist and nationally certified psychologist, USA. Contact him at 323 8772, or P.O. Box N-896, Nassau, The Bahamas. Or you may email at question@soencouragement.org Or visit the website www.soencouragement.org**