

## **Sexual Harassment and Abuse – Wake Up Church!**

The almost daily revelations of sexual misconduct by persons in leadership has caught everyone's attention. What I sense is a move towards a new reality in the United States. The on-line "Me Too" movement has emboldened victims (female and male) to speak up and confront those persons who have harmed them. It appears that we are moving to a place of zero tolerance, which I believe is a good thing.

This news may be sobering for many churches, who have tried to sweep leadership abuse under a proverbial carpet for many years. A word of caution to these churches, you may find that these "secrets" may soon be made public, just as past abuses by persons of celebrity have become news.

Early in my ministry, I was called as an Associate Pastor to a church which had recently been made aware that a staff member had been abusing children. The church leadership tried to handle it quietly, allowing the staff member to remain under certain restrictions. In time, those restrictions were violated, and the staff member was asked to resign. Years later, news reporters stood outside of that church, reporting on new allegations (as well as past) of sexual misconduct by that individual.

Unfortunately for victims, too often churches have allowed their leaders the opportunity to continue abusing. In some denominations, offending leaders have been moved to new locations with only a "slap on the wrist" type of warning. In freer church traditions, church leaders have been allowed to remain in place with similar benign warnings, or loosely crafted and poorly monitored action plans.

I suppose that these churches are trying to exemplify loving and forgiving responses to these offenders. But what kind of message does this give to the victims? In every church where I have served, there have been survivors of sexual abuse. Some experienced the abuse as children, others as adults. Most frequently the abuse was caused by church leaders or members. In most cases the victims, their families and the circle of support around them ended up leaving the church for another church - or no church.

Does an incident of abuse mean the end of a ministerial career? I would say often, but not always. I believe in the rehabilitation of abusers who are willing to do the hard work of understanding why they abused. Their therapists also would need to provide reasonable assurance that the behavior would not be repeated. Finally, any restored leader would need to submit to close monitoring by persons who would hold him/her strictly accountable.

I have always stated that the future vitality of any faith community is healthy leadership. Leadership health is dependent on the willingness to hold one another accountable. Without accountability, a church risks losing the trust of both its members and the community.

It is time to wake up church! The days of sweeping these kinds of indiscretions under the carpet is over.

*Alan A. Newton*