

An Open Letter to Congregations: A High Standard for Church Leaders

Church leaders, those who act in the Lord's name, must be held to a high standard; their position is not a right, it's a privilege. Any act to ordain, to depose, or to reinstate credentials is not a personal request and should never be treated as such. It has less to do with an individual, and much more to do with the honor of the CRC and the kingdom of our Lord. Who we allow in leadership sends a strong message about the kind of community we are; it has implications for all of us.

Quoting from an article in the Banner, (July 8, 2011, "What if it Happens in Your Church?") "When my pastor first touched me sexually, I trusted him as a representative of God. I believed he was a kind and wise pastor whose passion was to serve the Lord ... What my pastor did *must* be OK, I thought." When the church ordains a pastor, they put their stamp of approval on that person; this is someone who can be trusted. When that trust is broken, it is not an individual issue, it is a church issue. The office of Elder and Deacon also, though different in mandate and task, do not differ in dignity and honor.

Sexual misconduct by church leaders reveals a misuse of the power and position entrusted to them. Patterns of destructive behavior may seem harmless at first, a touch, a hug, etc. These can escalate into more serious emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, causing great harm. Legal ramifications and risk of future harm must be carefully considered whenever misconduct occurs. It is *always* the responsibility of church leaders to maintain healthy boundaries in their ministry relationships. When misconduct by a church leader is not taken seriously, or when it is referred to as a consensual affair, it shows that we don't understand the concept of positional power or what is required of a church leader.

Church leaders are not the only ones held to high ethical standards. Many other occupations involving responsibility and care have strict ethical codes. These include teachers, doctors, nurses, counselors, and social workers to name just a few. Professional licenses are revoked, and are not reinstated when sexual misconduct occurs. Why would we want to accept a lower standard for church leaders?

Our Lord is described as full of grace and truth. We believe in God's forgiveness and transforming love. True repentance, a change of heart, is reflected in a humble attitude of service, putting others first (see Phil 2). It seems to me that a servant leader would not seek or demand to be placed in a powerful position (by moving to another place, by pressing forward with requests and appeals, by blaming others rather than taking responsibility, by intimidating council members to act in a given way, etc.) Rather, he or she would understand the harm done, the consequences of past actions, the implications for the community, and seek new ways, outside of the role of pastor or church leader, to serve the church. The church community deserves and should demand no less.

May the Lord's name be honored among his people in the way we love one another. And may church leaders set an example that is worthy to be followed.

Bonnie Nicholas, Safe Church Ministry director