

Ministry After A Betrayal of Trust---Some Questions Answered

by The Reverend Dr. Deborah J. Pope-Lance

QUESTION: What is Ministry After A Betrayal of Trust?

ANSWER: Any clergyperson ministering where a previous religious leader engaged in unethical conduct, in sexual misconduct by sexual exploitation, in sexual abuse or harassment, abused of power or authority, breached confidentiality, neglected responsibility and/or violated the boundaries of pastoral role or ministerial relationship is in an After Betrayal of Trust Ministry. These clergy are sometimes called *afterpastors*.

QUESTION: What are the unique challenges facing clergy in After Betrayal Ministries?

ANSWER: Clergy in After Betrayal Ministries experience a variety of unique challenges---unwarranted distrust or suspicion; being misheard or silenced; inexplicable emotional reactions; manipulation, coercion, sabotage, triangulation; undue reverence or dependence. Common organizational patterns include irresolvable conflicts, ambivalent decision making, secret keeping, distraction, denial and disorder, over functioning, controlling leadership, closed, ineffective communications, and passive membership. Because of these unique challenges After Betrayal Ministries can be difficult and stressful. Clergy report stress exacerbated health conditions, vocational crisis, premature resignations and personal/family upset. Anecdotal evidence suggests that clergy in After Betrayal Ministries have an increased risk of engaging in unethical conduct or of having a ministry terminates early or unhappily.

QUESTION: What are the essential tasks for clergy in After Betrayal Ministries?

ANSWER: Healing a church, synagogue or organization after a previous religious leader's betrayal of trust requires the exercise of patience over the long haul and integrity in every encounter. Focus on these four tasks:

- (1) Provide solid basic ministry---
Do the job with grace and humility, and without need to be revered or loved.
Be professional, competent, clear and conservatively cautious.
- (2) Cause no further harm---
Exercise good etiquette and good ethics.
Know one's personal limits.
Respect the boundaries and limits of one's role.
Understand one's own family of origin issues.
- (3) Heal the office of ministry---
Rebuild trust, integrity and appropriate expectations.
Be everyone's minister and no one's opposition.
Empower and collaborate with lay leaders.
Refer counseling to others.
- (4) Survive well personally and professionally---
Take nothing personally and everything professionally.
Find and use additional support.
Take extremely good care of yourself and your family.

QUESTION:

What do clergy in After Betrayal Ministries need in order to do their best work?

ANSWER:

Clergy in After Betrayal Ministries need to know that they are taking on uniquely challenging and difficult work and that additional support and resources will be available to them. In particular, after pastors do better when they have opportunities for individual support and coaching, regular attention to stress management and wellness, and education in ministerial ethics, conflict resolution, family of origin and organizational systems theory, and interpersonal abuse and violence. The capacity of an after pastor to bring healing and resolution is significantly influenced by the availability of complete and authoritative information on the previous religious leader's unethical conduct and by the clarity of expectations and ethical standards expressed by local, regional and continental religious bodies.

QUESTION:

What personal and professional qualities do After Betrayal Ministers need?

ANSWER:

Clergy serving in After Betrayal Ministries need to be stable and mature, experienced and competent. Charisma is unnecessary and sometimes a handicap. Clergy need to be aware and respectful of boundary issues in their professional and interpersonal interactions. Visible differences, i.e. in gender, age, or affect, from a previous religious leader who engaged in unethical conduct can be an advantage. Increased personal and professional risk suggests the need for good support networks outside the church or synagogue, especially from family and colleagues, and the importance of not being distracted or stressed by other significant demands, i.e. a family member with chronic illness. Since these ministries can end prematurely or unhappily, clergy must be prepared for the career risk of short or interim tenures.

QUESTION:

What other resources on Ministry After Betrayals of Trust are readily available?

ANSWER:

A useful resources: Written from a variety of perspectives for those serving as or supporting after pastors and for those in after betrayal ministries is Restoring The Soul Of A Church edited by Nancy Myer Hopkins and Mark Laaser (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1995). A comprehensive resource is When a Congregation Is Betrayed: Responding To Clergy Misconduct (Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD, 2006), Beth Gaede (ed.); Dr. Pope-Lance is among the principle authors. "The Inherent Ethical Risks of Ministry" an article by Dr. Pope-Lance (available from the author) articulates the ethical hazards of the ministerial profession and helps after pastors appreciate their own increased risk for misconduct when serving after a predecessor's betrayal of trust.

The Reverend Dr. Deborah J. Pope-Lance, an ordained minister and licensed marriage and family therapist, has been researching, writing, teaching, consulting and coaching in the field of clergy and congregational ethics since 1985. Her knowledge of the challenges in ministering after a betrayal of trust is informed by thirty years in parish, intentional interim and community ministries and by consultations with Presbyterian, Unitarian Universalist, Baptist, Reform Judaism, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist clergy. Dr. Pope-Lance has a psychotherapy and consultation practice in Natick, Massachusetts, providing counseling to individuals and relationships as well as coaching and support, by phone or in person, to clergy who find themselves in challenging placements for a variety of reasons, including the aftermath of betrayals of trust. You can request resources or learn more about coaching and consultation services by contacting Dr. Pope-Lance by email, RevDPL@gmail.com, or by phone 978-443-4393.