

“Not in my Church”: When Sexual Abuse affects the Congregation

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This article discusses the self-understanding, role, and position of the congregation when a spiritual leader and trusted person are accused of sexual abuse. Basis to discuss three different positions (meaning the congregation as bystander, injured and upright) is to apply mainly a theological and psychological perspective to illuminate the understanding of these congregational positions. The three positions are revealed on the basis of analysis of empirical material.

The research question to discuss is *how can congregations handle sexual misconduct committed by their spiritual leader in a healthy and empowering way for their members?*

The aim is to explore a means in which the congregation can move from being a bystander and a victim, to become a healing and empowering community for the offended and the offender, but also for the members of the fellowship.

The three positions are also discussed as a possible procedural description depending on how the congregation deals with the challenges created among members by the accusations against their spiritual leader.

Keywords: Sexual abuse, congregation, church, power, policies, diaconia

“Not in my Church” is the title of “an award-winning, dramatic presentation of one church faced with a betrayal of trust by its minister” because of sexual misconduct¹ and it was created by the Faith Trust Institute² in Seattle. It tells the realistic story of a clergy misusing his pastoral power to abuse sexually the women in his congregation under the guise of providing pastoral care. The story illustrates that sexual misconduct obviously affects these women but the abuse of trust also affects in many ways the members of the congregation. Sexual abuse and sexual misconduct in the context of the church are usually connected to a local arena, such as a congregation, a church choir, a youth club, etc.³ A spiritual leader and a trusted person in the church—a clergy, a deacon, a youth leader, or a volunteer for church work—violates the relationship boundary with a child, a youth, or an adult in a vulnerable position by sexualizing the relationship (Fortune 2004, p. 4).

Congregations and denominations have developed or adopted policies for sexual misconduct in the church. These actualize the status and role of the Christian fellowship when accusations about sexual misconduct happen inside

1 <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/store/01tA0000000M7rXIAS> (02.09.16)

2 <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/> (05.09.16)

3 I name further on »in congregation« or »Christian fellowship« as overarching terms for local arenas in church.

the church. The policies in Norwegian church context mention the fellowship as an arena for sexual misconduct, but to a small degree, they emphasize the local fellowship as affected (Kleiven, 2010, pp. 296–299, 368–390). This article focuses on the role and status of the congregation when sexual abuse occurs, as well as on the ways this affects the fellowship.

Scientific literature about congregations under pressure because of sexual misconduct is limited, and mainly focuses on some specific hallmarks in the actual situation. The authors use different theoretical approaches, mainly from the perspective of theology (Gaede 2006, Fortune and Poling 2004, Poling 1991, Dokecki 2004, Fortune 2005), psychology (Gaede 2006, Benyei 1998, McClintock 2004, Bera 1995) and sociology (Jenkins 1996, Dokecki 2004, Vetlesen 2005, Shupe 1995, Fortune 2005). The literature explores and discusses issues in which a clergy or another trusted person in the congregation is accused of sexually assaulting children, youths or adults. All the literature has in common the fact that they are discussing the actual situation as presented. This article goes one-step further by exploring various process pathways by showing three different positions that the leadership and members of the congregation are mainly choosing in order to take care of themselves and to survive the pain and sorrow. By using experience, empirical material and mainly all the mentioned scientific literature, I am discussing the functionality of each of these positions. My aim is to explore a means in which the congregation can move from being a bystander and a victim, to become a healing and empowering community for the offended and the offender, but also for the members of the fellowship.

Aim and Research Questions

The aim is to discuss three different positions that the congregation may take when accusations against a spiritual leader are made. The three positions are revealed on the basis of analysis of empirical material in my dissertation from 2008 (NN 2010) researching sexual misconduct in different denominations in Norway.⁴ Interviewing the formal and executive responsible person in the denomination and the alleged accused person in a specific case, and analysis of policies of sexual misconduct, is the basis for identifying the positions. Twenty years' experience in being responsible for handling accusations and counselling denominations and Christian NGO's about sexual misconduct substantiates and confirms characteristics with the presented positions.

4 A starting point to reveal some hallmarks with these three positions are also derived from the empirical research in my master thesis about the Christian assembly and sexual abuse, interviewing members of five different Christian fellowships where a spiritual leader was accused for sexual abuse (NN 2001).

The three positions are the congregation as bystander, injured and upright. The positions are also discussed as a possible procedural description depending on how the congregation deals with the challenges created among members by these accusations.

The research question to discuss is *how can congregations handle sexual misconduct committed by their spiritual leader in a healthy and empowering way for their members?*

I understand sexual misconduct primarily as a misuse of power. The article will therefore initially provide some reflections on understanding the term ‘power’ in relationships. After a brief understanding of the theological and sociological status of the congregation in this context, I will describe and discuss the three positions in dialogue with a compilation of perspectives mainly from theological and psychological disciplines. Conclusively, I reflect on the relevance of these three positions to understand and handle challenges when sexual misconduct affects congregational life.

Understanding Sexual Misconduct – A Power Approach

A power analytical approach is necessary to describe the content both of sex and of sexual abuse. Regarding power, the French philosopher Michel Foucault offers a relevant theoretical framework for focusing on power as primarily a relational and systemic term. He characterizes power as ‘omnipresence,’ claiming, “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1998, p. 93). No power-free interaction exists. Power is impossible to characterize or categorize in an exact way. It is still important to emphasize, “Power is exercised rather than possessed” (Foucault 1979, as cited in Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 117; Foucault, 1979, p. 26). This approach of understanding the power issue focuses on relational interactions on both the personal and institutional levels. The primary question is not who exercises power, but how we do so.

Foucault’s aim in developing his analysis of power was to challenge “every abuse of power, whoever the author, whoever the victim,” because he believed that this kind of confrontation created freedom (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 100). Johannes Van der Ven concretizes this understanding when he describes “the dissymmetry of violence, which may be understood in terms of the distinction between ‘power to do’ and ‘power over’” (2004, p. 162). This approach makes visible the link between power exercise and power position in relationships. Power is an exercise, but in a power-asymmetric relationship, the responsibility for exercising influence over another’s life is always on the person in a position of ‘power over.’ A definition of sexual misconduct anchored in this approach is as follows: “‘Sexual misconduct’ means that the person with more power in an asymmetric relationship uses sexualisation of the relation-

ship in such a way that the other person's boundaries of intimacy are violated" (Kleiven, 2016, p. 259).

Sexual misconduct occurs when a person in power misuses the sexualisation of a relationship as a means to cross the intimacy boundaries of another. The other person should have the power to define when he or she experiences this crossing of boundaries. A complex issue in this context is the offender's power to misuse a position of trust to force an understanding of mutuality and agreement on the violated person. This dynamic will also influence the understanding of the congregational members when a spiritual leader has betrayed them by misusing his or her trusted position to abuse another person sexually.

Congregation from a Theological and Sociological Perspective

The congregational role and status can be objectified when sexual misconduct happens in the church. An analysis of the policies among denominations in Norway revealed that the local Christian fellowship was relevant only as a source of information about the accused, the accuser, and the context of the sexual misconduct. It is for these reasons that this approach must be questioned from a theological and psychological viewpoint. The theologian Marie M. Fortune⁵ identifies the following hallmarks with the congregation:

Wherever and however the community of faith gathers, it claims to be a part of the body of Christ and, through it, we are called to ministry. – But the other reality is that congregations are made up of victim/survivors, offenders, and bystanders, which always complicates the situation where someone has assaulted or abused another person. (2005, p. 219)

Fortune initially describes the congregation from a theological perspective. Still, this can also be linked to the complexity that the different understandings of roles create in the fellowship. I will focus on three relevant ecclesiological perspectives in this context and follow up by describing some role and systemic matters from the sociological field. These may also be understood as an elaboration on and continuation of ecclesiological perspectives.

Congregation is understood as "the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27), emphasizing that Christ is visible through the interaction between members. There are some obvious theological implications when sexual misconduct occurs. When a member in the fellowship is sexually abused, this will affect the whole congregation. When the abuser has an authoritative position as a spiritual leader, his or her behavior concerns and affects everyone belonging to the fellowship.

5 Marie M. Fortune is the founder of and former senior analyst for the Faith Trust Institute (now retired). She is also an ordained minister.

This actualizes a second ecclesiological affair. Who shall have the authority to interpret and describe the reality in the Christian fellowship when an accusation of sexual misconduct happens? An aspect from the sacrificial dimension is the power of the individual member to be a part of the Ministry of Reconciliation, giving space for dialogue, settlement, and forgiveness (2 Cor. 5:20). Still, this power can also be abused to offend another person by exploiting his or her vulnerability. The power to serve is then misused by acting in a suppressing way. The theologian Patricia L. Liberty⁶ mentions the importance of letting “the principles of the power and abuse model be coupled with a theological base that establishes the sacred nature of the power of the ministerial relationship and its specific purpose in the life of church and community at large” (2006, p. 26). A third perspective is the position and role of the leadership in the congregation. The position of a leader is mainly based on the trust earned in the relationship with congregational members. The authority is often founded on all three of the dimensions explored by the sociologist Max Weber: legal, traditional, and charismatic (1971, pp. 91–104). In this context, the authority of the spiritual leader carries “the image bearers for the divine, the symbolic representatives of the larger truth and reality” (Liberty, 2006, p. 76). The paradox is that this can make the spiritual leader vulnerable because of the traditional expectations the sacral role creates among members and in the self-understanding of the leader (McClintock, 2004, p. 110). The link between authority and vulnerability presupposes a consciousness from the leadership about their position of power, but also the need for integrity in consideration of their own boundaries.

The social process and content of the fellowship is adequately described as “a process of interaction that structures immediate experience into distinctive cultural myths within a historical and social framework” (Poling, 2002, p. 125). The strength and vulnerability of the fellowship are connected to the understanding of reality that members have created jointly. This common understanding will characterize the interactions, culture, and structure of the fellowship. A fellowship is ‘a web of relationships,’ which underlines its strength from a social networking perspective (Poling, 1991, p. 127). It has formal and informal rules, which give direction and control interactions. In particular, what Candace R. Benyei (theologian and psychologist) calls ‘tacit rules’ are of great influence (2006, pp. 37–38). These types of interactional rules are characterized by a tacit and non-verbalized agreement. Social control affirms these rules and social shame affects those who break them. The persons in power influence the contents of these tacit rules, and they hold the power to influence how the fellowship reacts to insulting behavior.

6 Patricia L. Liberty is the cofounder and director of Associates in Education and Prevention in Pastoral Practice, an ecumenical and interfaith resource that assists individuals and organizations in the aftermath of clergy sexual abuse.

Family is used as a theological metaphor about the Christian fellowship. The congregation has also been compared with the family, understood as a social system (Benyei, 1998, p. 12). That makes it relevant to look at common features between sexual abuse in a family and in a congregation, arguing, “The enmeshed congregational system has the same emotional qualities as an incestuous family” (McClintock, 2004, p. 111). A fellowship carries its own history. Incest influences affect the interactions in a family. Sexual misconduct in the church will affect the interactions in the congregation. Processing an experience of incest is not only relevant for the offended, but for the whole family. Sexual misconduct in church concerns the whole congregation. When this understanding is neglected, the congregation is in danger of developing cultural and structural hallmarks, which increase vulnerability to new offenses.

Individuals belonging to a Christian fellowship that experiences sexual misconduct will easily have preferred identification of the roles of the victim(s)/ survivor(s), perpetrator(s), or bystander(s).⁷ The preferred role is often connected to what kind of relationship the member has to the offended and the offender. A systemic perspective makes it easier to understand that the preferred role is not only connected to the specific story of misconduct, but also to the kind of family history had by the members. The reason for this is, “The family projection system also muddies the picture of relationship and determines the movement of the system” (Benyei, 1998, p. 8).⁸ The family history of the congregational members will influence on how they understand the accusations against their spiritual leader. It may assign the whistleblower the role as the enemy, the offended being the scapegoat, and the leaders who are responsible for handling the accusation is associated with an authoritarian father. The complexity increases in the discovery that the choice of role does not necessarily correlate with which role others assign to the person. The role of bystander may be interpreted as an offending position. When a significant portion of the congregational members considers themselves offended, it may cause the assaulted to become invisible.

The church, as ‘the body of Christ,’ shall safeguard the persons exposed for sexual abuse, and prevent further abuse from occurring. This is no less important when the accused is a spiritual leader in a congregation or a trusted person in church. Benyei writes, “We are all called to be prophets; that is, we are all called to stand up and be counted even though we stand against the opinion of what may be the comfortable majority” (2006, p. 94). This is chal-

7 These terms have been used in an interdisciplinary discussion of the content in collective evilness, as well as where it is claimed ‘the structure of action is *triadic*, not *dyadic*’ (Vetlesen, 2005, p. 238).

8 Benyei defines ‘Projective identification’ as follows: “When an acquaintance in some way resembles one or more of the powerful caretakers in our family, we tend to make, quite unconsciously, *assumptions* about that person based on our experience with our family member” (1998, p. 8).

lenging because the unpredictable is predicable: You have to expect all kind of reactions when the congregation is informed of sexual misconduct from one of their own. That is why it is tempting for the leadership in the denomination to close their eyes to this struggle among the congregation and disclaim responsibility to decide what to do.

The Congregational Approach When a Spiritual Leader Commits Sexual Misconduct

A spiritual leader in a congregation has committed sexual misconduct against one of the members. This may be a child in the church choir, a youth preparing for confirmation, or a woman asking for pastoral counseling. The leader admits what he has done after being confronted with the accusations of the assaulted. Still, he tries to excuse what he has done by describing his own vulnerability in connection to his family situation, workload, or personal problems. He emphasizes his intention to do well, but because of the circumstances, he still ‘fell in sin.’ The members of the congregation may interpret the accusations and choose their approach differently when this story is revealed. Individual choices of position will often be marked by one’s relation to the victim(s) and the perpetrator(s), but also by their own life story in connection to traumatic or challenging relational offenses and conflicts (Fortune, 199⁹). The choice of position as a fellowship will be affected by in what ways the congregation is given space and possibilities to relate to the story as a fellowship, and not only as individuals.

Three positions the congregation may adopt in the face of sexual misconduct inside the church are: (1) the position of bystanders, (2) the position of the injured, and (3) the upright position (N,N., 2010). The three positions will be critically discussed, both as explicit possibilities, but also as a procedural model in processing a traumatic experience in congregational life. This process correlates to the migration of the assaulted from being a victim to becoming a survivor (Fortune, 2005, p. 207).

The Congregation as Bystanders: Silence and Withdrawal

A congregational position of ‘bystander’ is taken, encountering sexual misconduct from their spiritual leader with silence and withdrawal. There is a reluctance to deal with the facts. Business as usual is the mantra of the leader-

9 Marie M. Fortune’s first book, *Is Nothing Sacred? The story of a pastor, the women he sexually abused, and the congregation he nearly destroyed*, was published in 1989. This is a classic in the field of sexual abuse in a church context, and it confirms and illustrates the description above.

ship and of the majority of members. This can be related to the shock phase in grief after losing a close relative in sudden death. They behave as if this has not happened—‘not in my church’. It is often an expectation of normality in the congregational life and a way to escape from something unbelievable. The approach to the undisputable facts by the leadership has an instrumental character: How do we find practical solutions that minimize the effect of the accidental affair?

The relevance of church history to understanding the position of ‘bystander’

In many ways, a paradox exists when a local Christian fellowship affirms their bystander position despite their own fellowship coping with the sexually abusive behavior of a trusted leader. The church history of dealing with sexual misconduct may be relevant to understanding why the position of bystander is still expectable. The theologian Beth Ann Gaede describes the history of the church in this field:

To summarize the old way of handling these cases, the offender was sent to treatment, given financial assistance, and often given a ‘geographical cure.’ The victim/survivor received at most a small financial settlement, often in return for silence. Because nothing was revealed about the abuse, all those secondarily affected were ignored. Even if a case became public, no thought was given to the needs of the congregation. (Gaede, 2006, p. 3)

The strategy seems to have been to avoid every kind of publicity, devaluing the reputation of the church by silencing sources for destroying headlines. The aims of the offended and the offender followed this line. Forgiveness and absolution were used as strategic weapons to increase the possibilities of success. The logical consequence of this strategy was to decrease the involvement of the congregation by only giving them practical help holding service as usual. Understanding the congregation as wounded and left behind was not in the mind of the denominational leadership. Pamela Cooper-White, professor of psychology and religion, describes the outcome in the foreword of the book ‘When a Congregation Is Betrayed’: “Congregations were left unaided to cope with rumors, suspicions, confusion, unconscious dynamics of splitting and secrecy, eventual membership decline, or repeating cycle of hiring charismatic, narcissistic clergy” (Gaede, 2006).

The attitude of the church leadership shown above will always influence the self-understanding of the local fellowship. The attitude of bystanders creates and affirms a culture that silences offending, abusive behavior. It will also necessarily normalize abusive behavior, because no one cares (Vetlesen, 2005, pp. 235–241). When the local Christian fellowship affirms the position of bystander when sexual abuse occurs inside the church, there is reason to claim

the congregation is at risk of developing a culture with room for abusive spiritual leadership. The psychologist Karen McClintock expresses, “Sexual abuse in congregations is preventable. It does not happen in a vacuum; it happens in a system. Within that system, secrecy, shame, and silence can foster a climate of permission for sexual boundary violations. Theological perspectives can deepen shame and create an environment where people act out” (2004, p. ix).

When a congregation acts as an outsider to what happened in the center of the fellowship, it might influence some core hallmarks in the culture. Shameful silence in response to an abusive leader will contribute to creating a culture of mistrust, tension, and conflicts among individuals and groups in the fellowship, but also between members and leadership (Benyei, 1998, p. 13). The outcome is an experience of resignation, especially among those who have been abused and their family, as well as among anyone who has been offended and betrayed.

Silence and the closed system

To be a bystander is to look at the situation without understanding oneself as a participant or as having responsibility. Still, this is an illusion, because a bystander always places him or herself in a position with a given perspective. Research on genocide confirms the passive position of bystander is a decisive contribution to maintaining genocide; “not acting is still acting: neglecting, forgetting to do something, is also letting things be done by someone else, sometimes to the point of criminality” (Paul Ricoeur, as cited in Vetlesen, 2005, p. 237). A congregation wherein the majority of members are bystanders correlates with the effect that offenses have on the self-understanding of the offended: silence and secrecy are not to be broken. Structures and cultures in a denomination may also be based on the same imagination (Kleiven, 2010). This emphasizes the destructive influence that silence may have.

James Newton Poling, emeritus professor of pastoral theology, claims, “Silencing those with particular experiences take the church toward moralistic violence, where persons must conform in silence in order to be accepted” (2002, p. 205). The imposed silence may create a pressure of conformity, which increases the shame inflicted on persons targeted by the offenses. Expecting the congregation to behave as if the offenses not had happened creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. It challenges the core in the relational climate by destroying the reciprocal trust based on openness. Professor (in communication) Peter Horsfield expands, “The failure to give congregations opportunity to deal with the emotional consequences of betrayal commonly forces those emotions inward into sabotaging or divisive behavior, frequently resulting in destructive divisions and scape-goating within the community” (2002, p. 68).

To silence the influence offenses have on daily life in the congregation may create a hurtful and offensive culture and may destroy the fellowship from the inside. It can be compared to stagnant water without any discharge, or as Cooper-White expresses, “like a closed-up house with a toxic, polluted river running beneath its floorboards” (Gaede, 2006, p. xi). Silencing as a tool to prevent destruction is an illusion closely connected to the content of shame. The injured, the congregation, and the denomination have in common the imagination that silence and a closed system is a healing antidote.

A silenced and closed culture will affect the interactions in the fellowship long after the perpetrating spiritual leader has quit. The accusations of misconduct have created alienation and resignation among the members. The fellowship expects the new leaders to change and heal the destroyed and at the same time, their trust in the spiritual leadership is broken. “Their ministries are frequently characterized by distrust and suspicion” (Pope-Lance, as cited in Gaede, 2006, p. xviii).

To make it even worse, it seems, “Afterpastors do appear to have an increased risk for misconduct” (Pope-Lance, as cited in Gaede, 2006, p. xxii). How to understand this point is an open question: “Whether this increase exists because of the unique challenges and strain on afterpastors or because betrayed congregations are confused about professional boundaries and do not clearly foster appropriate conduct cannot be known” (Pope-Lance, as cited in Gaede, 2006, p. xxiii).

This emphasizes the risk of taking a congregational position of bystander. There is a potential to legalize different kinds of offensive behaviors, making healthy boundaries of offensive behaviors in the role as spiritual leader more diffuse for everyone. The logic is also that spiritual leaders with a transboundary behavior may be attracted to these kinds of fellowships (McClintock, 2004, p. 106).

A bystander position creates an understanding that the known offenses are a taboo topic. The outcome leaves the congregation with no possibilities to discover and recognize the traumatic effect of the offenses on the individuals and on the interactions within the fellowship. The congregation by affirming to be bystanders is in danger of developing an offending culture as such. We know this position is historically the most common. This reinforces the need for strategies that give the fellowship possibilities to change its position from being a bystander to being a participant.

The position of being a participant legalizes being injured and a victim. A participant of a fellowship will always be involved when a person given authority from the fellowship misuses his or her position to sexually abuse another person. Still, the self-understanding of being injured will be different depending on the personal involved in the fellowship. However, being a participant gives a freedom to accuse on behalf of oneself. Going from being a bystander to being a participant is the focus on the next part.

The Congregation as Injured: Betrayal and Confrontations

The injured congregation understands itself as a participant and not as a bystander. The fellowship is aware that “bystanders are forced to take sides” (Farrell, 2004, p. 45). The leadership and the members must choose how they understand the situation and how they will relate to the offended and the offender. To understand implication is also to realize that the abuse of trust by a spiritual leader is a betrayal against the fellowship itself. There are at least two conditions for such an understanding. The first is that the congregation “must be told as soon as possible what happened and what the consequences will be for the offending clergyperson” (Gaede, 2006, p. 1). Gaede continues by justifying this assertion: “Experience has shown that congregations where such disclosure is not made are negatively affected by the ‘secret’ for perhaps generations, impairing the congregation’s ability to carry out its mission” (2006, p. 1).

The congregation needs information about the contents of the case, the process to clarify and decide the way ahead, and what kind of consequences this will have on daily life in the fellowship. There is also a need for general knowledge about how sexual misconduct affects the fellowship as the arena for such behavior.

The second condition is the need to help process this experience. It is necessary to be accepted and empowered as a participant. This has to do with legalizing openness for different kinds of reactions and positions from groups and individuals. Different understandings and reactions among individuals depend on what kinds of relations and personal histories each has before the sexual abuse occurred.

The injured congregation is aware of being involved—as a fellowship—as an outcome of the leadership behaving abusively. It must define its position in relation to the offended and the offender, as well as the consequences for the fellowship as such.

The congregation’s relation to the offended and the offender

The injured congregation must relate in one way or another to the offended and the offender. It is challenging to act adequately when the majority of members are frustrated by being hit with something not understandable and confusing. The members are reacting differently. The outcome in this situation is often that the offended persons become invisible, and the focus is mainly on the offender (Fortune, 1999). An injured fellowship will, just as an individual would, be close to their own hurt and have less energy to take care of others. It is easier to blame someone or something, such as the offender, the leadership, or God. The members can choose three different positions in relation to the perpetrator. They can “support an offender’s denial that he is respon-

sible for the offense; believing his guilt, ostracize him completely from the congregation; or ignore the whole issue altogether” (Fortune, 2005, p. 221). The alternatives make the splitting effect visible. Choosing a position leaves few possibilities for dialogue between different groups. The group choosing to ignore the issue wants to be bystanders, but they will easily be placed in the tensioning position between the two other groups. They then have the choice to either join one of the other groups or leave the congregation. The psychologist Walter H. Bera¹⁰ conducted a survey on the members’ reactions when their spiritual leader was accused of sexual abuse. He pointed out six different kinds of reaction patterns (Bera, 1995, p. 100).

<i>Do not believe</i>	<i>Confused</i>	<i>Easy Grace</i>	<i>Believe – But do not understand</i>	<i>Anger</i>	<i>Rage</i>
Could not happen here	How could it be?	We are all sinners	Dynamics of sexual abuse	At offender	At offender
Conspiracy	She or he was so good and successful	Not that bad	Offenders or victim dynamics	At organization	At scapegoat
		Just a mistake; Not that serious; Forgive and forget		At others	At God

The accusation challenges how the individual members understand reality. The complexity in the reactions makes visible the need for support from the outside. Different kinds of reactions have emotional and existential blast effects both into the lives of each member and into the fellowship. Each member has their own individual story implicating different kinds of offensive and suppressing experiences, and this will influence their reactions and interpretations of the situation.

The injured congregation is in a crisis. Still, the difference between being a bystander and injured is that the injured congregation has the possibility of realizing it is in a crisis, because it is no longer a covered or silenced matter. Knowledge of being in a crisis is healthy, because it provides the opportunity to process and clarify alternatives. “The key to getting through this difficult period together is to give people enough space to be wherever they need to

10 Walter H. Bera is the founder and director of the Kenwood Therapy Center, LLC, and Co-founder of the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program (SHARP) (Minnesota).

be”¹¹ (Hopkins, 2006, p. 67). The legitimization of being an injured fellowship also creates possibilities to relate adequately to the offended and the offender.

The conflict theory as a framework for understanding may be helpful to normalize the tensioning situation among members of the congregation. Theologian and ordained minister Lorraine Frampton emphasizes this point, claiming, “The goal when addressing the initial conflicts regarding relationships and decision-making procedures in misconducts is the recovery of the congregation and victims” (2006, p. 29). This focus visualizes the difference between a juridical- and ecclesiological-based conflict resolution. The legal system aims to clarify the guilt and responsibility of the accused. An ecclesiological focus means to take care of and serve justice for the injured, to rebuild the fellowship through openness to the different kinds of perspectives, and modeling respect for the grief work occurring.

The position and role of the leadership in the congregation

When the leadership in the congregation experiences the crisis as a personal matter, they are to a limited degree capable of handling a constructive process without help from outside. They need support and coaching to be in charge in a competent way. A core condition is therefore to help the leadership stay one step ahead of the other members going through their own processing. The less time and fewer possibilities to do so, the more the leadership is in need of support and external help.

The leadership is challenged in three different areas. They need a common understanding of the case concerning sexual misconduct and they must inform both the offended and offender of this. They must also inform all members of the congregation about their understanding, using words and modeling an attitude that legalizes and makes room for all kinds of reactions while doing so. The third challenge is to ensure the regular activities continue as before to the extent possible.

The term ‘afterpastor’ has been used in the context of being the pastor that followed a spiritual leader who abused his or her trusted position to engage in sexual misconduct. ‘Afterpastors’ sharing their experiences have brought some common reflections and conclusions (Hopkins, 2006, pp. xviii, xx). It seems “the disappointment, confusion, or anger felt towards the offending cleric is displaced onto the afterpastor” (Pope-Lance, 2006, p. 55). The pastor must not only be a part of the grief work among the congregational members who have experienced broken trust from a spiritual leader, but he must also be linked together with the offending spiritual leader. The consequence can be that “the

11 Nancy Myer Hopkins has a family system background, and she has consulted with and trained laity, clergy, and judicatory officials to help traumatized congregations recover from leadership trust betrayals.

unsupported afterpastor is at risk of burnout, and unfortunately, no matter what form the burnout takes, it is always experienced as another true betrayal by vulnerable congregants” (Hopkins, 2006, p. 73). The afterpastor’s need for support and mentoring from outside is obvious.

The self-understanding of being an injured congregation creates the possibility to process an experience of being betrayed and left behind. The members will choose different positions regarding the offender and the offended. They will also have different opinions about how the leadership is taking care of the congregation. The different challenges for the leadership are relevant on the individual, relational, and systemic levels. A successful process depends greatly on the honesty of the leaders regarding their own personal positions and the need for help with processing. The aim is for a common understanding of the case and agreement about how to handle it.

The injured congregation may stay injured and more or less go into a destructive process as a disillusioned fellowship and decrease in number. The other possibility is to go through the struggle and sorrow and into a third position dealing with the reality of the sexual misconduct in a way that builds trust and a constructive interdependence among the members. Reflection on the third position is exploring this last alternative.

The Congregation as Upright: Reconciliation and Empowering

The upright congregation means the congregation, which is capable of behaving as a fellowship, giving space and grace when encountering all kinds of positions, and still giving priority for inclusion of the weak and degraded. The inclusive fellowship must be exclusive of the abuse of power, from whatever or wherever it comes. The congregation, being an arena for sexual misconduct, will often struggle on the path to relating to each other and especially to victims and victimized members. The path from being a bystander to being injured is in itself highly demanding. To achieve the aim of being an upright fellowship seems heavenly, but it is still possible. I will in this part describe and discuss some hallmarks and characteristics of this kind of congregation.

The congregation compared to the injured, the perpetrator – and to itself

The upright fellowship has processed their own experience of being an injured congregation. Still, this kind of processing is almost never the end of the story. An injured person must live with their story all their life, but a crucial difference is if the story becomes history rather than a part of continuing daily life. In the same way, the congregational process will also be different when their story of power misuse and sexual abuse no longer has a devastating impact on

daily life of the fellowship. This is the path from being a victimized and injured congregation to having the self-understanding of being a survivor. This alleviates from a narrow focus on itself as a fellowship to a focus on the person or persons who have been inflicted sexual abuse or misconduct. Liberty says, “It is not coincidental that the healing work of congregations supports the healing journey of survivors. When congregation does its work, survivors are helped in theirs” (Liberty, 2006, p. 80). The congregation is able to relate to both the abused and the perpetrator in an adequate way. This implies the lack of a common understanding of the case among members. There will still be different groups and positions. Still, the position is clarified and there is mutual respect for each other and the way the leadership has handled the situation. In addition, the different positions also have a potential to increase available perspectives of helping to take care of both the perpetrator and the abused. Openness and dialogue in the congregation have clarified what kinds of different understandings there are and that it is not possible to live with and still be a part of the same fellowship.¹² The leadership is then able to include the members of the congregation in accordance with their positional decisions. This gives space for both the leadership and the congregation as a whole to confirm the injured as injured and the perpetrator as responsible for the violation.

A hallmark with the upright congregation is that it is allowed to question the established understanding of reality, also into the theological field. It seems sexual abuse challenges theological performances in two topics. It challenges the potential of the Christian leader to do evil. The trusted leader had the spiritual authority to interpret reality among the members in the fellowship, and uncovering his abusive behavior crushes the understanding of him as a role model in judgment and goodness. It also shakes the performance of the almighty God, allowing this kind of evil to happen inside His church. The injured congregation has legalized openness about what consequences the offenses have for the fellowship. This provides the possibility to create a culture with space for humble wondering about how broken images of the human being and God allow for the grasping of limitations in understanding the mystery of God and the complexity of human beings.

The distinctive diaconal features of the upright congregation

Poling describes some hallmarks of “loving communities as revealed in the testimonies of survivors in dialogue with Christian tradition” (1991, p. 147). Four of these hallmarks are used to discuss some core features with the upright

12 Living together with a disagreement about the position and space for the perpetrator in the congregation is often the issue. To take care of the victims and the victimized implies often the limiting of participation in the fellowship by the perpetrator (Bera, 1995, p. 102; Frampton, 2006, p. 33).

congregation: the Christian fellowship as ‘inclusive’ and ‘just’ and as both ‘multiplicity’ and ‘unity.’ These may also be characterized as hallmarks with an ecclesiology that is diaconal anchored related to offensive behavior. “The church as a community is characterized by inclusive love. The church includes those who have been excluded and values the interior experience of every person” (Poling, 2002, p. 204). This means the inclusive fellowship is able to recognize its own mechanism of exclusion and to deal with these kinds of mechanisms. The inclusive fellowship as a hallmark of the empowering congregation includes a conscious understanding of the place and role of relational power in every kind of fellowship. The empowering use of power presupposes using authority to give the injured and excluded a voice and find justice for the oppressed in the fellowship. Still, this approach will also demand limits for what can be included. There must be a conscious reflection on the potential of the relational power to exclude (Poling, 2002, p. 205). An explicit challenge in this context is how the congregation shall relate to the perpetrator. The inclusive fellowship will give the most vulnerable and weakest part in the relation preferential rights to be in the fellowship. The consequence is that what keeps the weakest part in the fellowship sets limits for who can be included.

A just fellowship must be understood in a theological interpretation of justice (Pope-Lance 2006:24). Still, it is relevant to understand the term ‘justice’ legally. A legal approach connected to accusations of abusive behavior will be important to clarifying what kind of behavior is breaking laws and what is possible to prove in a legal system. Still, in the same way that sexual misconduct in the church must be interpreted from a theological perspective, so also must the understanding of the hallmarks of a just fellowship. The consequence is to accentuate the relational dimension of justice, but also to empower the value and worthiness of all the individuals in the fellowship. When encountering the injured, this will be materialized in “listening, physical touch, tears, honest sharing, and so on” (Poling, 1991, p. 150). The aim of justice is primarily reconciliation, as the Christian fellowship is built on the reconciliation of Christ. John Patton, theologian and an expert in the field of pastoral care, describes, “It is the Christian fellowship, which makes real the context of forgiveness” (1987, p. 132).

A just fellowship includes a leadership taking a position regarding the accusations, and it passes this on in action and attitude. The basic Christian belief is that everyone is included in the reconciliation of Christ. Every human being shall therefore be given the chance of be a part of a Christian fellowship, but everyone shall not be given the chance to be a part of a specific fellowship if the vulnerable in the relation is excluded.

Space for multiplicity is the third hallmark mentioned. One part of this is a multiplicity that legalizes different opinions on the story and consequences of the accusations of a violation. Still, multiplicity in this context includes more. “Multiplicity is the existence of an otherness that cannot be reduced to unity

and familiarity” (Poling, 2002, p. 209). To allow ‘otherness’ means to give the individual the right to have their own story of life and to have an approach to a contemporary situation limited and influenced by the perspectives of life he or she holds. The will in the fellowship to approve this kind of multiplicity is closely connected to the ability to confirm the right to be limited. This confirmation makes it possible to give everyone in the fellowship value and worth. The opposite is to demand uniformity. To impart the right to be limited and different is to visualize the use of power against the inflicted and graceless shame.

A fellowship characterized as a unity may linguistically seem to be a contradiction of multiplicity. Still, the French philosopher Blaise Pascal claims, “Unity that have no respect for multiplicity is tyranny” (as cited in Tjørhom, 1999, p. 211).¹³ I believe there exists both interdependence and a dialectic relationship between unity and multiplicity. Unity means something different from agreement and uniformity. The nature of the Church is unity. God’s love springs from the atonement of Jesus Christ, “which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Col. 3:14). Unity means belonging, which grows out of a tensioning multiplicity. To recognize the unity of the empowered and upright congregation is based on how Jesus Christ identified himself with the suffering and injured (Mat. 25:40). This brings the congregation into a position of consciousness about the organic connection between the inflicted violation done to one person by a trusted person in the fellowship and being injured as a fellowship. The multiplicities of different opinions and perspectives that will always be a part of sexual abuse have the potential to enrich the congregation. The premise is a will to practice openness and generosity with each other, linked together with courage to face the painful reality exposed by abusive matters. The characteristic of unity based on multiplicity is a fellowship that leaves space for contrast and tension “harmonized through faith and courage” (Poling, 2002, p. 209).

Conclusion

This article has discussed the self-understanding, role, and position of the congregation when a spiritual leader and trusted person are accused of sexual abuse. Basis to discuss three different positions is to apply mainly a theological and psychological perspective to illuminate the understanding of these congregational positions.

The presentation of the upright congregation is an ideal stand. Still, it is not possible to be a liberated congregation without having passed through the phases of being a bystander and injured. It is also important to underline that

13 My translation from Norwegian to English

the upright congregation still has elements of the two other positions. Honesty relating to a story about sexual abuse involving members of a fellowship will usually imply that the members represent different positions. Simultaneously, the accentuation of the congregational position will increasingly be unambiguously.

It is possible to reflect on a correlation between the recovery process of the injured going from being a 'victim' to becoming a 'survivor'¹⁴ and the process of the congregation going from being a bystander to becoming upright. The abused person has been inflicted with an understanding of reality that degrades the right to be a victim. Recognizing oneself as abused and a victim is crucial to complete the process of skipping the self-understanding of being a victim as a description of the life quality as such. The bystander congregation has a self-understanding closely connected to the abused by being inflicted a position of not being involved in the betrayal and misuse of power of the spiritual leader. The injured and the upright congregation have also some common features when the abused understands him- or herself as a 'victim' and (after processing) as a 'survivor,' respectively. This parallelism contributes to underlining one important point: as the abused person depends on support and help to become aware of what the violation is and has done, so also does the local fellowship. The congregation is in need of a supportive system from outside to follow the process described in this article. Denominational and local policies and strategies are crucial towards building congregations to be both upright and modeling liberating care when accusations of sexual abuse arise, because sexual abuse both concerns and affects the Christian fellowship.

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14 This process is well described by Marie Fortune (205:205–208)

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