

RESPONDING TO CREEPING DESPERATION

The following six questions are rooted in over thirty years experience with clergy accused of misconduct and/or in conflict with their congregations. The questions seem to surface in one form or another as these clergy have reflected on their misconduct or their role in conflict.

At least two caveats apply to these six questions and their annotations. There may be highly intractable causes of these problematic behaviors which render the person incapable of significant change. Also, clergy may find themselves embroiled in a conflict that was not of their own making and over which they have no influence. The latter circumstance requires extraction skills not referenced here, and the former may require dismissal or severe constraint.

The annotations following each of the six questions below can be viewed both as proactive measures to minimize the probability of misconduct and conflict ever occurring, and as helpful responses after the fact.

None of the annotations to these questions are intended to constitute an ecclesiastical "silver bullet." Further, they may unintentionally imply unorthodoxy or be inconsistent with the theology, doctrine, or polity of some faith traditions. You are free to make use of them in any way that meets your needs. They are not listed in any particular order of importance.

Most of the clergy with whom I have worked are often initially perplexed by their own misconduct or conflict seeking behaviors. "That's not who I am; why did I behave that way?" Likewise from their family, "I've been married to this person for 20 years, and this is so out of character for him/her."

The insight that many of them come to is that their misconduct and conflict is often a product of their own creeping desperation over an extended period of time. A long simmering anxiety formation if you will. And they begin to recognize that they have been caught in systems where they feel powerless and unappreciated and not held accountable. Here then are six sources of anxiety born of desperation.

1. Is it possible that I am no longer called by God to an ordained ministry?

- ❖ I am still impressed by the number of clergy in extremis for whom this is a very difficult question. The dominate idea is "once ordained is to be ordained forever." It is as if to entertain other non-ordained responses to "my call" would be to admit defeat, define myself as a failure, or worse, transgress against God.
 - ✓ This requires a process to carefully discern one's call as something dynamic, a work always in progress. It also requires us to disabuse ourselves of the notion that ordination and continuation in ordained ministry is the only faithful response to a call to ministry.
2. What other jobs can I apply for with theological credentials and religious work experience?
- ❖ A hidden part of this question is usually, "How are we going to pay the bills if I leave ordained ministry?" Another hidden part of this question is, "What will my family and friends say if I leave ordained ministry?"
 - ✓ Working with a qualified vocational or career counselor often results in a here-to-fore unimagined "Plan B" that reduces vocational anxiety in the clergy and their families.
3. How do I respond to unrealistic expectations of me?
- ❖ After careful consideration, this question invariably translates into two substantially different and more helpful questions. "How can I organize and prioritize my responses to expectations of me?" And, "How should I respond to conflicting and unreasonable expectations?"
 - ✓ Skill training and ongoing mentoring in organization, prioritization, and conflict management are significant anxiety relievers/confidence builders.
4. Why am I the only one of my peers who sometimes feels lonely, isolated, and trapped with nowhere to turn?

- ❖ Out of this question grows a realization that some of the established structures for responding to clergy-in-need often consist of audiences in front of which the clergy want to look their best.
 - ✓ Meaningful assistance comes in a way that feels safe, accessible, and confidential as defined by the clergy consumer. This assistance often excludes elected or appointed officials and anyone chosen by them.
5. Why can't I get over the idea that the responsibility for everything rests with me?
- ❖ Parker Palmer refers to this as functional atheism, "the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here I am the one who must make it happen." The question then becomes, "Why do I volunteer for this hazardous duty?"
 - ✓ Answers to this question are often well informed by sustained, guided reflection on one's family of origin and other autobiographical stories. The outcome is learning how to stay in ministry in a healthy way.
6. If my own heart is the place where Jacob's ladder is supposed to touch the earth, then why is my spiritual life so dry?
- ❖ Attention to one's spiritual life, often slowly, becomes but one of the hundreds of competing things that must be done on a regular basis.
 - ✓ Usually we start at the beginning, by (re)creating a daily fidelity to solitude, silence, and prayer with ongoing guidance from a spiritual director. What Benedict of Nursia called a "rule of life."