



## Leading in a Wounded Church

By K. Wayne Day

One of the most important challenges of the church in our times is the specialized ministry necessary in a congregation after trust has been broken. In recent years there have been many well-publicized instances of clergy and other church leaders who have crossed the boundaries of common morality and taken advantage of those who trusted them. This kind of situation leaves behind not only wounded individuals, but also wounded churches, whose potential to carry out effective ministry is diminished.

A different type of leadership is needed when trust has been broken. The relationship between leader and congregation is complex and heavily seeded with aspects of vulnerability that often involve the deep inner lives of congregants. The immediate task is to bring healing to a broken situation. What is the process of healing and how is it accomplished?

**Integrity.** All leaders must demonstrate integrity. But in a situation where trust has been broken, this is much more critical *and* much more difficult. It is unrealistic to expect that church members will extend the benefit of the doubt they might normally afford to leaders. Demonstrating integrity becomes a leader's number one priority.

Leaders must expect a higher level of scrutiny in a wounded congregation. Normal words, actions, or procedures will be perceived very differently in a turbulent congregational setting. Small mistakes, weaknesses, or everyday short cuts, which would be accepted in an environment of trust, can be enormous red flags in the church where trust has been broken.

Imagine, for example, a church where a pastor has embezzled money. A new pastor, who is thoroughly honest, comes into the situation expecting to continue with normal habits of money management. But in a situation of heightened anxiety, the new pastor should expect questions about his or her financial integrity – even if it has never been an issue for them before. Procedures that were totally adequate in an environment of trust are no longer sufficient. Leaders should be scrupulous in avoiding any financial irregularity – or even the appearance of such.

Leaders in a situation of broken trust must demonstrate integrity in every aspect of personal and financial life. Integrity, integrity, integrity goes a long way toward restoring some kind of equilibrium that the congregation desperately needs.

**A Therapeutic Perspective.** When there is a great deal of anxiety, hurt, and mistrust, leaders can be instrumental in reducing anxiety – but they also run the risk of making the situation worse. Overreacting to the intense feelings within the congregation is a common pitfall. Anticipating suspicious or hostile reactions can help a leader avoid this trap.



One approach is to take a therapeutic stance in which the congregation or congregants are understood as needing help. This may seem somewhat grandiose, but it can help leaders defend themselves against undeserved hostility and, even more importantly, avoid overreactions that simply make the situation more difficult. Edwin Friedman's concept of a non-anxious presence is critical.

**Accept Strategic Limitations.** In a healthy congregation, leaders are expected to advance a strategic agenda – diagnosing congregational needs and mobilizing people, money, and spiritual energy to lead the congregation forward. While strategic leadership is enormously valued in the church today, in a wounded congregation the environment in which ministry takes place is greatly changed.

Ministries emphasizing strategic objectives are often unsuccessful in a congregation where trust has been broken. Restoring a loving, caring community in which everyone is valued and cared for should be the first priority. Temporarily setting aside the strategic agenda in such a situation should not be deemed a leadership failure.

Healing does eventually occur in many situations where trust is broken. Sensitive, self-aware, and well-focused leadership is critical in helping a wounded congregation regain trust and begin to move forward in constructive ways.

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