

Church embezzlers also rob congregations of trust: "More than just an injury"

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For 24 years, Barbara Myers worked with Barry R. Herr at a small denominational office in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where everybody knew everybody. Co-workers were aware of when someone's family had a baby, a wedding or a death.

But they didn't know Herr was embezzling money—more than \$1 million from the Lower Susquehanna Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, where he was treasurer. He used the money to buy classic cars, police said.

"He ripped off his own church," said Myers, a spokesperson for the synod. "Where else do you trust people if not in a church environment?"

Last November, Herr was sentenced to 30 months in federal prison.

Churches, synagogues and temples of every size have been victims because many don't have checks and balances when it comes to money, experts said.

"Churches have always assumed they were one big happy family and they didn't have to think about those things, and they were wrong," said Anson Shupe, who has written five books on church misconduct.

When a theft happens, "it's more than just an injury. People feel a lot more betrayed," Shupe said.

In central Pennsylvania last year, a former school secretary was sentenced to probation and community service for embezzling \$85,000 from the Good Shepherd School in Camp Hill, a Roman Catholic school.

In July, state police said the secretary of Mt. Holly Springs United Methodist Church embezzled more than \$35,000 during a seven-year period. The Mt. Holly Springs

church is doing well despite some “stress and disappointment,” said Jerry Wolgemuth, spokesperson for the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church.

A small Episcopal church in Lycoming County was devastated after a treasurer embezzled \$117,000, police said.

The reported cases probably are just the tip of the iceberg, said Tracy McCurdy, director of the state Bureau of Charitable Organizations. “I think we’re going to see an increase,” she said.

Experts said the bad economy might prompt some people into embezzling who never did it before, and groups that wouldn’t have reported it will do so now because they need to seek restitution.

“You run into this ethical dilemma: We’re the church and we’re supposed to forgive,” Myers said. “That doesn’t let you off for your legal responsibility. It’s a crime.”

In 2003, Scott Lee Chambers, 37, of Muncy, Pennsylvania, was sentenced to 15 to 30 months in state prison after he embezzled \$117,465 from St. James Episcopal Church in Muncy, which had an annual budget of just \$60,000, police said.

He wrote checks and used credit cards for trips to Florida and New England, for exotic birds, and for cremation for a dog.

“It just blew the church apart and it was almost destroyed,” said David Culbertson, who became pastor of St. James in 2004. “There was a lot of anger. It did cause division among members of the church.”

Those who have been at victimized churches and schools describe a profound sadness and loss of innocence.

“There are often lawyers and very savvy business people sitting on the boards, and they often feel very embarrassed,” said Valerie J. Munson, assistant director of the Terrence J. Murphy Institute for Catholic Thought, Law, and Public Policy at the University of St. Thomas School of Law in Minneapolis.

Often treasurers, secretaries or clergy begin taking a small amount of money, believing they will put it back. “And they realize that goes undetected, and maybe they’re not able to replace it the way they thought, and they just get in deeper,”

Munson said.

Looking back, Myers and her co-workers at the Lutheran synod wondered whether they had missed something.

When someone questioned Herr, he gave them a lot of accounting jargon that no one understood, Myers said. "And you feel stupid and you let it go." -*Religion News Service*