Trust betrayed: A crisis in congregational life

by Bradley N. Hill in the August 26, 2008 issue

It was Wednesday. Time to visit my youth intern again. I really, really disliked Wednesday mornings. As I walked out of the office, I said, “Be back around noon,” to my administrative assistant. She knew where I was headed and smiled in support.

I took my time driving across town and walking toward my destination, an austere building. Finally I had to go in. Approaching the window, I took a deep breath, signed in and turned the book around to the deputy. He looked up at me with a flicker of recognition and handed me a card. The door buzzed open and I went through. In a few minutes John was ushered into the room on the other side of the glass. He offered a wan smile, sat down and picked up the phone.

John was a former staff member at our church—former because he had betrayed the trust, the call, the church and at least one young person entrusted to him. John was arrested on charges of molestating a church family’s son. He was finally convicted of lesser charges and was serving his time locally.

At the jail, our phone connection was always bad. John would be only inches away, but we always had to talk in elevated voices. It tended to keep things impersonal.

“Hey John. How ya doin’?” I would always ask.

“OK. How are you?” he never failed to respond.

We’d cover the news from the outside: how the family was doing, what was new at the church, what was going on “inside.” Eventually we’d get to how John was doing. At one point, he announced that he had completed six months of his nine-month sentence.

“Brad,” he told me, “I can’t wait to get out of here. The day I walk is the day I catch a bus for Arkansas.” I can still hear the drawl in his voice.

“But I gotta say, Brad, as much as I hate this, I am closer to God now than ever. I need him every day. I have no more pretense.”

Three months later, John was released and left town. I’ve talked to him a few times since then. Once he asked me for a job reference.

To say that visiting a former staff member in jail is depressing is like saying racial discrimination is bad. *Depressing* doesn’t carry enough weight and fails to convey what I’ve experienced as pro-rated suffering with occasional balloon payments. I was glad John was growing and learning, but I couldn’t wait for him to be gone, to be in Arkansas or anywhere else.

I remember getting the call at church one Wednesday evening. Our midweek programs were in full swing. As I picked up the phone, John, our 19-year-old youth intern, was having a great time with the middle-school kids—I could tell by the noise down the hall.

“Brad, I don’t know quite how to tell you this.” Susan’s voice was scratchy and full of tearful emotion and anger. “My son Lance has told me about John.” She resolutely pushed on to tell me that John had provided alcohol and adult movies for her son. “They spent the night in the youth room watching these movies.”

Numb and shaken, I called in the two other pastors on staff and told them the story. We called in John. Faced with Susan’s accusation, he looked down, then away, then began to sob. It was all true—but he vehemently denied any sexual contact. “I just wanted to get close, to be a friend to Lance. He is a troubled boy.” We called the church chair, the church lawyer, the police and our denominational authorities. Everyone was caring and supportive but cautioned, “Brace yourself for a lawsuit.” John was arrested.

After the process was put into motion, the three of us pastors sat together, stunned. How could this happen? How could we have missed this pattern of behavior? What clues had we missed? What was the church’s responsibility to Lance and the family—and to John? We spent a long time in prayer together before we finally went home.

The next day we informed the council. On Sunday I told the congregation everything except the family’s name, at their request. Because of the legal implications, we could not specify all the details, but we could enumerate the charges pending. I led

the congregation in a time of corporate prayer. This decision—to make a full disclosure to the whole body—turned out to be key. Instead of placing blame, the congregation asked, “Where did we go wrong? How can we help? How can we make needed changes?” A policy of secrecy would only have created a climate of suspicion and greatly constricted congregational support for everyone involved.

Lance and his family left the church, but to my knowledge only one other family left over this issue. No lawsuit was brought against the church. Susan was a mature believer and decided that as long as justice was being served, as long as the church took steps to prevent any future similar occurrence, there was nothing to be gained by suing the church. John served his time and returned home, sought and found counseling, and stayed away from youth ministry. He is still a part of a local church. Our church paid for the counseling and attorney needed by the victim and his family.

As senior pastor, my primary responsibility was to minister to Lance and the family. I was at their house many times over the next months. I saw how needy Lance was and how eager he was for an older friend and mentor. I learned that John too desperately needed to be needed. He was immature, self-absorbed and still seeking his own identity. When these two combustibles met, it was a volatile mixture.

I was afraid that Susan would demand exclusive loyalty to her family, but she gave me permission to minister to John. Had she said, “You are either with us or with John,” I would have chosen Susan, Lance and family. I did ask another area pastor to be a pastor to John during this time, and John’s mother called me to say how appreciative she was for this care. If it had not been for the church, she suggested, John would have perished in jail.

I wish that I could have told the church the identity of the victim and his family. The congregation was in huge distress over this incident, because members could not reach out to help. They desperately wanted to care but had no outlet. Eventually the names leaked out, but even then, because privacy had been requested, members could not make contact. This left the family isolated; they had few others to whom they could turn. They became separated from the very people who could have nurtured them.

A review of our procedures and accountability systems revealed glaring weaknesses. John had been required to report only to the associate pastor for youth. There was no real direct, hands-on oversight or accountability. No one asked about youth

activities such as snowboarding or movie night. Why would we ask? We did not live in a climate of suspicion.

We put new guidelines into place: youth workers should not be alone with anyone; a parent needed to be present at all church events; each staff worker was required to be in an accountability group (though adherence to this was uneven). New staff were more thoroughly mentored during a kind of novitiate period. These were improvements, but anyone with ill will and a brain could circumvent them.

This almost happened. A few years later another young youth worker was hired, and soon she began a relationship with one of the young people in her group. Although it began innocently, the relationship was quickly discerned to be inappropriate. The steps we took ultimately resulted in the youth worker's dismissal. Her avoidance of accountability and her mentor's alertness had set off all the alarms in time.

The church's members supported their leaders through this incident. They raised questions and expressed emotion but made no accusations. Nobody ever said, "You should have . . ." with 20-20 hindsight. The local newspaper was fair (even allowing me to make corrections in their story before publishing) and seemed impressed with how the church was handling the situation.

Ministry, especially youth ministry, is risky business. Parents take a risk sending their kids to youth activities. The church should be a place of trust, refuge and sanctuary, and for the most part it is. But it is also full of sinners, and it sometimes attracts predators. We are faced with the seeming choice of either clamping down so hard with a lengthy list of rules that all creativity and real ministry are stifled, or of allowing so much liberty that an individual can easily take advantage. Finding the balance is never easy.

Over the years, Lance's family went through a period of considerable turmoil. Lance struggled in school and got in trouble with various authorities. Eventually the family found a new church and seemed to emerge relatively healthy. Susan told me that Lance managed to stay connected to God, in part due to the pastoral care that was extended to him. Lance felt that though the church had betrayed him, God had not, and he found his way back.

The church grew up through this trial. It had been operating by an informal family system in which we all just tried to get along and do our rather undefined jobs. But as the Lord added numbers to the body, this approach worked less and less well. I

deeply regret that it took such a traumatic incident to kick us into awareness, but an awakening did happen.

Both Paul and James connect such trials to growth, saying that testing produces endurance and endurance leads to maturity (Rom. 5:3-4; James 1:2-4). In our case, we learned that the best lessons are those most dearly won.