

Church gossip and a pastor's double life

I'm obligated to a high standard of confidentiality. I also find the stories on social media hard to resist.

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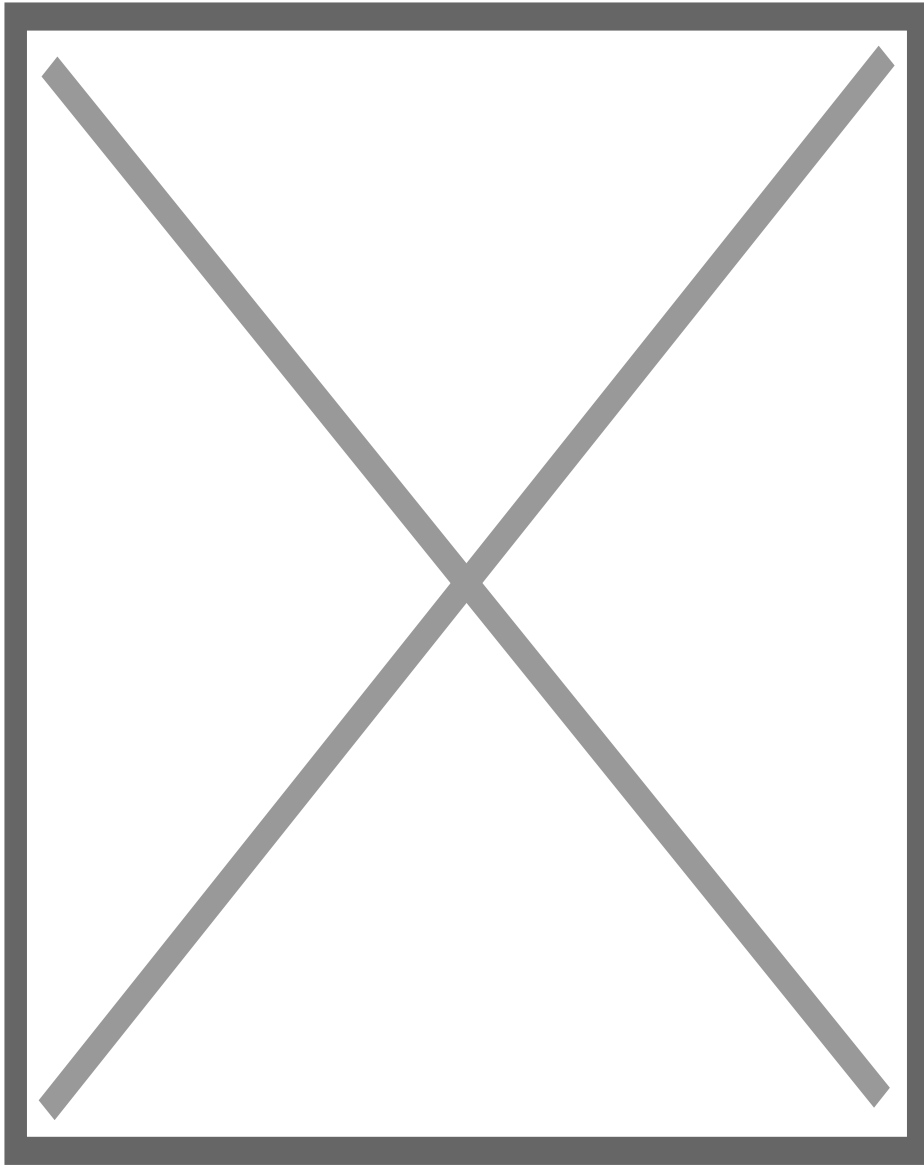


Illustration by Luisa Jung

Among the dismaying realizations of midlife, I have had to face the fact that I enjoy church gossip. I try to be responsible, to turn away from the truly petty stuff about individual behavior. But I find the stories about institutions and leadership dynamics that circulate on social media hard to resist.

I might plead that the channels have narrowed—you are currently reading one of the few outlets for proper church news—and that official statements from seminaries and denominations are all but hidden in ugly PDFs in the bowels of websites overdue for an update. But I know that this is at best a minor mitigation and at worst an excuse. Why on earth did I pay attention to the commentary on the candidates for the presidency of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod? The plausible answers are all unflattering.

And as I manage my own administrative end of the church world, this looks less like a foible and more like a double life. When I'm not online, I am the pastor of a congregation, the head of a staff, the nominal supervisor of a preschool, and a member of my synod's committee for ordination candidates. I occasionally speak to and informally consult with denominational and parachurch bodies. From the most routine council meeting to the decisive moments in a person's ministry process, I am obligated to a high standard of confidentiality, which I have upheld reasonably well.

As a consumer of whispers, I want the supply to be fresh and constant. As a person in the rooms that are whispered about, I have to do my best to see that none of that supply comes from me or anyone else there.

This doubleness has gotten stretched across a yawning chasm between different sets of norms and expectations. A disappointed ministry candidate, staff member, or preschool parent can go online and say anything they want about the decisions I've been a part of, attributing low motives and terrible bigotries to people who are bound by professional ethics not to respond in kind. Stories that once upon a time would have been the stuff of private anger or embarrassment can be heaved into feeds for anyone to see and evaluate.

On the other side, we are left with limited rhetorical tools to explain ourselves. We have to speak in the first-person plural, to avoid names and details, and in general to preserve a style of communication that might once have seemed restrained or professional but now just sounds suspicious. It conveys in content what the PDF buried in the website conveys in form: We don't expect you to read or believe this. The rumor, as Mark Twain might put it, is dancing through the algorithm while the official account is still being spell-checked.

The cognitive dissonance is all the sharper for the documented fact that norms of confidentiality and restraint have been used to protect genuine wrongdoing, undermine victims, and leave others at risk. This is bad enough when valid accusations are walled in by nondisclosure agreements and secret settlements. It gains a special horror when the scriptural and theological strictures against speaking ill of others are turned into shields for crimes and spears aimed at those offended against.

Even so, I've gained a new appreciation for those easily abused admonitions to refrain from public attack, to speak with restraint, and to guard the reputations even of people you may have cause to publicly condemn. Paul's references to gossip, slander, and idle talk have an unavoidably moralistic tone that I resent despite myself, especially knowing that Paul himself spilled the tea from time to time. But maybe that's the point. The destructive speech we least recognize is our own.

"Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips," the psalmist says (141:3). This puts the focus where it belongs—with oneself, through an appeal to God. What feels like a disadvantage in the first instance—an organization with responsibility for others (however poorly handled) has to play by the old rules, while individuals have license to say anything at all—can be a source of strength over time. How damaging has it been to see official organs of the US government become venues for describing political opponents of our elected leaders as scum, lunatics, and so forth? How much credibility, built up over generations, has been lost this way? James is right that the fire of the tongue can set a great forest ablaze (3:5), and the destruction happens much faster than the repair ever can.

This is particularly true when the stories we may want to tell in self-defense—about a child whose behavior put the safety of the whole class at risk, a candidate for ministry whose personal struggles were too severe to be compatible with such a role, or a parent or staff member whose conduct was inappropriate—need to be held back for the good of the very person who is in a position to speak ill of us in the first place. It feels lousy to remain consistent while the world around you chases every stray rumor, but it really is the only thing to do.

And if there's any grace in this dilemma, it's that the algorithm buries almost as fast as it lifts up. A world in which there are neither cultural nor technological barriers to gossip is one in which the value of every story eventually falls to zero. This, too, is a scary thought. But it's all the more reason to ask God to guard the door of our ears, too, and to admit only what we have a valid purpose in hearing. Whatever I learn as I trawl social media for unflattering church stories vanishes. What remains is the habit of seeking. And that's a habit both consumers and sources—and especially those of us who are both—are better off breaking.