



Does Ministry Fuel Addictive Behavior?

Certain approaches to ministry lead to self-destruction.

SALLY MORGENTHALER

Most church leaders know me as the woman who writes and speaks about worship. What only a few know is that I have spent the last decade experiencing the effects of my spouse's sexual addiction, an addiction that began in late childhood and was never treated.

As untreated addictions go, my husband's escalated. In the 1990s, his secret life overtook his life as pastor and resulted in a felony sex offense: molestation of a child by a person in a position of trust. The girl was my daughter's best friend who lived next door; a special needs teen who was eight years older than my daughter, but her exact mental age: eight.

What an unspeakable tragedy. This young woman is still living with her parents, afraid of men, incapable of living a normal life. And the damage didn't stop there. My daughter's childhood was shattered. She entered her teens without a father, the memory of what father she'd had tarnished beyond recognition. At thirteen, my son assigned himself the role of man-of-the-family, and has carried way too

many burdens into his adult life.

I never imagined such a nightmare.

Since the offense had actually been a series of about fifty molestations over a two-year period, and since the victim was an underage, special needs child, my spouse's bail topped that set for some murder suspects. He was convicted, incarcerated, and subsequently sentenced to eight years in a halfway house for sex offenders. To date, he has served five of those years.

I became a separated (and subsequently divorced) parent; a single woman with baggage the size of a small continent, and sole provider for my children. What had looked to outsiders like television's *7th Heaven* somehow morphed into film noir: *American Beauty*.

Addiction of any kind leaves its marks. Yet the mark we carry that is more embossed than any other is that of God's faithfulness.

Over the past eight years, my children and I have been healing. Much of that healing has come through loving family and friends. More has come through a marvelous local congregation, giving me a new reason to hope about the church in a broken world. Most signifi-



cantly, however, our progress into wholeness has been the result of an intentional re-shaping of who my children and I are as a family: consciously deconstructing unhealthy family patterns (we are a no-secrets, truth-telling family), as well as adopting a practice of radical presence: being there for each other at unprecedented depth and levels of sacrifice.

Another component of my own healing has come from studying the addictive process (its precursors and effects). Reflecting upon our family's bizarre journey in light of recent research on sex addiction, I began realizing that others may benefit from what we have experi-

enced. Redemption and transformation are at the heart of the gospel. God is in the process of redeeming our family's journey, our descent into addiction's vortex.

And God never wastes a journey

Going public

My first "out-of-the-closet" step came a year and a half ago at a national pastor's conference. When the conference organizers heard my story, they were immensely encouraging. They agreed: my experience as a church leader, wife, and mother in the grip of a spouse's sex addiction needed to be told, and

Image-driven pastors learn how to edit their real lives for public consumption. In the heat of stress or in the wear and tear

it was time for the telling.

Even though there were a dozen other classes they could have attended, they came to this one. Whether it was the subject of sex, a woman teaching about sex, or a woman who usually teaches about worship teaching about sex, something got them in the doors; 150 attendees tried to fit into a room meant for 60. It was a standing-in-the-side-aisles, spilling-into-the-hall scenario.

I had three goals for that day:

1. That pastors acknowledge their humanity and love themselves in the midst of their struggles. (After all, grace doesn't just apply to others. It applies to ourselves.)

2. That they gain a basic understanding of the addiction cycle and dysfunctional sexual behavior. (What we don't understand controls us.)

3. That they identify some of their own ministry realities that are toxic, undermining emotional and spiritual health. (Just because we put a "ministry" tag on certain church leadership norms doesn't make them good.)

The last concept seemed most provocative: the way ministry is set up, idealized, and practiced may actually fuel addictive behavior. Some of these ministry dynamics are described below. This list is not exhaustive. This is merely an introductory treatment.

(Also note that I use male terminology for pastors in this article. It is not because I am ignoring female pastors, nor because female pastors are immune to addictive behavior. It is because I have not had opportunity to observe female clergy in their settings. Consequently, I would not pretend to be knowledgeable about their particular contributing dynamics.)

As we enter 2006, peoples' lives are fracturing to a degree that would have been unimaginable even ten years ago. Given this environment, care-giving institutions and their leaders are at a much higher risk for escapism.

We must face the realities of our current

contexts, attitudes, practices, and dysfunctions as pastors. Ministry practiced in unhealthy ways leads to destructive life patterns, especially clandestine, escapist addictions.

Maintaining ministry patina

Religious culture has a hard time with pastors and pastor's families who have flaws. Of course, the healthiest congregations do not expect their pastors to walk on water, do not put their pastors on pedestals. But in my experience, such congregations are not the norm.

Thousands of pastors serve congregations that, despite rhetoric to the contrary, expect their leaders to maintain (at least for public viewing) near-perfect marriages, near-perfect families, and near-perfect lives.

While it may be fine that their pastor forgets to take out the trash, is hyper-addicted to football, burns the toast, or consistently forgets his wife's birthday (all endearing foibles that make good fodder for sermon jokes), he'd better not have any serious bouts of depression, credit issues, children who get caught selling ecstasy, or a wife with a drinking problem.

Granted, certain kinds of church attendees are attracted to "bad-boy" clergy: those who tell and re-tell their stories of wild living, knowing that they will draw certain kinds of people simply because they have lived life on the edge. When a pastor is vulnerable for the right reasons, not just to entertain the masses, but to humbly demonstrate the power of the gospel, it is a positive step.

But let's not be fooled into thinking that "having a past" gives a pastor permission to be human in the present. More than a few congregations function with this unspoken proviso: "Pastor, we love the fact that you've walked on the wild side. It makes you fun to listen to. You're down-to-earth, we're not afraid to bring our neighbors. But your past is just that: the past." Even former bad boys get stuck living on pedestals at altitudes inhospitable for anyone less than angelica.

And it is not only congregations that build pedestals. Many pastors paint unrealistic pictures of themselves. This kind of leader carefully crafts a leadership icon, rather than presenting his God-given, multi-faceted self. This kind of leader sets himself up for failure. The heat of congregational stress, or simply the wear and tear of the mundane, will wear through the veneer to what is really there.

Image building is a dangerous game. And it's at the core of addictive behavior. Addictive family systems are built on image, from the practice of keeping secrets (the "no-talk" rule), looking good to the community at all costs, to living a double life. If a pastor comes into the ministry with an addictive family background or has otherwise developed addictive tendencies, a congregational system that requires him to uphold an impossible, squeaky-clean image is going to function like a match to gasoline.

Whenever pastors try to hide behind this patina, the chances of latent addictive behavior escalating is extremely high. The more impossibly perfect the pastoral image, the greater the need to engage in taboo behavior.

Where addictions begin

Sexual addiction takes root most often in family environments where parental-child bonds are weak or non-existent; where development of normal intimacy among family members has been blocked or interrupted.

Family environments that lead to sexual addiction are also often sexually repressive, viewing sex as dirty and not discussing normal, developmental sexual questions within the family. It may also include a history of "sexual secrets," particularly abuse and incest.

When such an environment is combined with extreme parenting styles—authoritarian on one end or non-involved on the other—the chances of sexual addiction developing are even higher. The odds increase even more when parents vacillate unpredictably between the extremes. (My former husband's family fits this category.)

While family-of-origin factors are not directly related to ministry practices, there is a conspicuous connection: many pastors grew up in highly religious homes and experienced more than the average share of suppressed intimacy and sexual repression. Many also experienced extremely authoritarian parenting

styles as well. As a result, pastors (as a group) could be more predisposed to sexually addictive behavior than the general population.

Getting what they owe me

Entitlement is the sense that one deserves preferential treatment for one's position or class. We normally don't think of pastors as having a strong sense of entitlement. Pastors are seen as givers, not takers. They're shepherds, counselors, who visit the sick and weep with the bereaved. If someone dies while the pastor is on vacation, he comes home.

But here is reality. Well-meaning pastors can work 80-hour weeks and still not be able to please their flocks. When a pastor work so hard, only to be rewarded with conflict and dissatisfaction, the unrelenting disappointment can push even the most idealistic, well-balanced clergy to believe he deserves better.

A large percentage of pastors enter the ministry because they want to give people what God wants them to have. However, there is a dark side: when a pastor gauges this primarily by the admiration and esteem he receives in return. To the congregation, he intimates: "I will overwork to emotional and physical exhaustion; I will deplete myself and my family; I will be everything you expect me to be if you give me the requisite status, appreciation, and financial compensation in return."

This unwritten contract is often the people-pleasing pastor's demise. He receives little appreciation and instead ends up depleted and resentful. The reason is simple: no pastor can fulfill all of a congregation's expectations. Congregations by their very nature are filled with sinful, unrealistic, needy people who will take whatever the pastor gives and still keep coming back for more. When these people in positions of power begin doling out helpings of criticism instead of admiration, the unwritten contract is broken. The pastor begins to simmer in a potent marinade of entitlement.

Entitlement is not an attitude becoming of a pastor, so he doesn't express it openly, not even to his spouse. It is his little but oh-so-acidic secret. Gradually, the acid eats into his motivation and into his soul: "I've given the best years of my life to this congregation. I have no time for family, much less myself. My kids are growing up without me. I'm at church 70-plus hours a week, and I still make 25 percent less than the average Joe in my congrega-



Sally Morgenthaler consults with pastors and staff on collaborative leadership strategies. Her book on co-creative leadership will be published this year by InterVarsity Press.

tion. If no one is going to take care of me, I'm going to care for myself."

At this juncture any addictive behavior begins to look really good. After everything he's done for his congregation, the people-pleasing pastor gives in to the feeling that he more-than-deserves the little piece of pleasure he's beginning to nurse on the side.

Co-dependency has its price, and it isn't cheap. When a pastor gets tired of giving and not getting back, he'll find some way to make up the difference. It is only a matter of when.

Unrealized dreams of success

Researchers at TheAmericanChurch.org studied attendance trends in 120,000 congregations between 1990 and 2000. Half were mainline, half evangelical. They found that the fastest growing churches were those with attendance between 1,000 and 2,000 (a 13.2 percent growth rate in 10 years.) In other words, American churchgoers were voting with their feet, and increasing numbers voted for big. The congregations that declined the most were those with between 50 and 300 attendees.

If that's true, that's not so good news for the small to medium-sized church. And it can be absolutely devastating to the pastors who lead them.

For over two decades, the entrepreneurial, multi-programmed church has been altering what people expect out of a church. The music they hear when they settle into their auditorium seats must compete with what's on their iPod. High-end visual technology during the worship service is, for many attendees, a given. In short, churchgoers expect a Sunday morning worship service to match their aesthetic experiences in the broader culture.

It doesn't stop at worship. It extends to the quality of childcare, children's and teen's programs, and adult education. The consumer-driven, felt needs-based ministry has redefined what church is and does. The concept of the church leader has also changed.

Entrepreneurial church wisdom is that pastors must be visionaries, risk-takers, and innovators, as well as spiritual guides. They are expected to be top-of-the-heap speakers as well, their stage skills honed to the highest cultural standards.

Realistically, very few pastors are cut out for this kind of leadership.

The average pastor may be at his best as

teacher, coach, or theological guide. He might shine as a catalyst: a convener of collaborative vision and process; a facilitator of deep community. If he tends toward the empathetic and intuitive, he may excel as a nurturer, counselor, wound-dresser, or heart-holder.

But he is not megachurch material.

Still, he makes the trek each year to the mecca-church of his choice. He takes copious notes in workshops, hoping to find the secret passage to "church success." He leaves these multi-million-dollar facilities with eyes big as saucers, telling himself that he, too, if he tries hard enough, can take his church of 90 or 200 and make it a 2,000-attendee destination point.

And what if he doesn't have the assertive, sole-visionary style? He'll learn it. He'll even fake it. He'll become someone else, invalidate and dismiss his own gifts, his own unique, God-given leadership style and strengths and passions, all in order to emulate the large church pastor he's admired from afar.

The profound irony is that, in the past decade, the wider culture has been steadily moving away from its love affair with power and authoritarian leadership personas. The toppling of Dan Rather by a rag-tag group of bloggers was not an anomaly. In the same spirit of organizational deconstruction, corporate America is accelerating its shift out of 1980s, hierarchical systems toward collaborative, webbed approaches to decision-making.

As the trend toward flattened hierarchies escalates, pastors who now consider themselves misfits in the world of entrepreneurial ministry may be dumping the very skills and personality bents most needed in the new landscape of engagement and empowerment.

Tragically, some of these so-called misfits will turn to an addiction, an escape out of what they see as a no-win proposition: become someone else, fit the mold, or fail. Instead of pushing back on leadership stereotypes that have long deserved questioning; instead of focusing on their strengths and becoming who God crafted them to be, they cave in.

Addiction, whatever the substance or behavior, then becomes a welcome oblivion, especially to those who have visited that oblivion before.

Diagnostic questions

Although we can't explore them here, there are other ministry dynamics that can function

Behind Closed Doors: Sally Morgenthaler's Story

No one knew what was happening at the parsonage.

How did you learn your husband's sexual addiction had led him to molest the neighbor's daughter?

We were on vacation, and the neighbor watching our house called to say he'd picked up a phone message from a detective wanting to speak to my husband. I thought it was so strange, and when I mentioned this to my husband, his face went white.

The day we got back from vacation, the detective called. "Mrs. Morgenthaler, we have reason to believe that your husband has been involved in a molestation case with the girl who lives next door. She told her school counselor a few weeks ago. He needs to turn himself in."

I hung up the phone and went to the garage (it was kind of his haven) to tell him the police wanted him.

He minimized his behavior. "Well, something might have happened, but we were just playing together and she must have misunderstood," he said.

Perhaps out of my own denial, I decided to believe him.

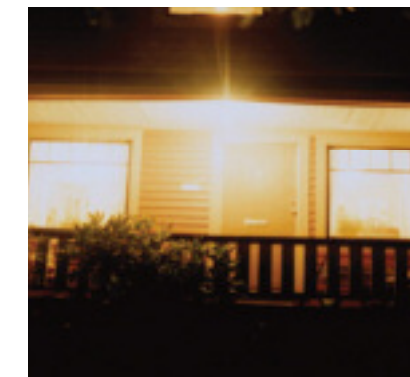
Were there any clues through the years that something was wrong?

I met my former husband in high school. We were married right after my senior year of college. He had a conversion experience in his last year in college, and he said God was calling him to seminary.

We were both in our late twenties when he accepted his first church position. We had a young son, and soon afterward our daughter was born.

I certainly had no idea that he had developed a secret addiction to pornography (he'd been introduced by a relative at the age of 12 or 13). I did know early on in our marriage

that something was not quite right. Our relationship was strained and distant. He worked long hours, which is not unusual in the ministry. However, after a few years, both I and the office staff began having problems finding him during the day. Later I would wake up the middle of the night, and he would be gone. Sometimes he



was in the garage or on the back porch.

What was happening during this time in the church?

The cracks started to show. After six years at his first congregation, he started a mission church, and I was the worship coordinator.

He visited several megachurches and became consumed with the dream of building a large church. He pressed this model on people, leading to conflict after conflict.

At first he'd gotten a lot of kudos for being a personal, compassionate pastor. He was the one that people could call on—a people pleaser, and he got much of his identity from being the man who would be there for people, day or night.

But a distance grew between him and the congregation—absences, forgotten appointments, capriciousness on decisions, increasing focus on

power and control, inability to follow through. An addiction takes time and energy. It consumes big chunks of brain power. It's a vicious circle: as more things went wrong in the ministry, he slipped deeper into his addictive cycle.

What about your marriage?

My life became all about rescuing him from himself and holding our family life together. I became a co-dependent. I tried to hide his behavior while suffering (with our children) its daily consequences. I just kept the plates twirling.

What happened when you found the pornography?

When I found him with the first magazines, ten years into our marriage, I was—I was incredulous. It was decimating to me as a woman, as his wife, to think for the first time that *I wasn't enough*. It wasn't till years later that I learned his addiction had nothing to do with me. It had to do with an untreated behavioral disorder he'd developed long before we met.

Was pornography a "gateway drug" for him? The first step on the downward slope?

Yes. Three years after his conviction I finally learned his whole sexual history: from print to peeping to sexual encounters with adults to exposing himself in public places.

Then finally, he had repeated sexual contact with my daughter's best friend, a girl who was retarded. Over a two-year period, while I was away from the house, he fondled her approximately fifty times.

Then the detective called.

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(Sally's Story continued from page 63)

I hired a high-priced attorney to make sure he didn't get arrested. At first I thought he was innocent. Protecting him and proving his innocence was my goal. I didn't want to subject my children to the shame.

He had left the church a few months earlier, and we were starting our own business.

A year after the start of the investigation, he was convicted and put on probation. But while he wasn't molesting anyone else, via polygraph tests, he admitted developing a fantasy life about our daughter. She was 13 at the time.

Finally he reoffended by exposing himself in a public place. He was sentenced to a year in jail and eight years in a halfway house and an intensive sex-offender program.

How was your spiritual life during that time?

Oh, it hit some real lows. I kept asking the "God, are you still there? Do you still love me?" questions. I remember sitting in the waiting room at the jail, watching all these women I had so little in common with, except our offender husbands and boyfriends, and wondering, *God, where are you?*

The lowest moment was the day probation officers had me read his sexual history from about age eight.

His history included things I had never known—affairs, risky behavior. It was like reading about a stranger. Nothing about our marriage relationship had been true.

That night I called a suicide hotline. I had sent my daughter up the street to a friend's house, because the next day I was ready to commit suicide. I didn't, because of God's still small voice drawing me and helping me to see that, though I felt I was nothing, I was all these children had. If I couldn't save myself for myself, God had given me these beautiful children, and that was a calling. God drew me out of that horrible dark place with that calling.

While I felt God was near, I didn't necessarily know that he loved me.

When did you regain the sense of God's love?

I filed for divorce after my husband was released from jail and began his time in the halfway house (2000). My children and I began the long journey into hope. We had the ability to choose a new kind of future. My son had been strong through it all. He graduated from college in 2002 and has established himself as a film editor. My daughter had some rough years, but by God's grace, her life turned around. She is graduating college next spring, and she is engaged

to a wonderful young man.

God has blessed us in so many ways, and all of our needs have been met. Every one of them. God has redeemed the years the locusts had eaten.

How has this experience changed your ministry—your view of yourself and of God?

No question, I was humbled and leveled. I have often wondered why people, especially those between 18 and 30, are so drawn to who I am and what I do. It can't be explained by my views about worship, leadership, or the church.

I've come to believe that they're drawn by God's humbling process in my life. My vulnerability has been pretty clear.

How has this affected your view of worship?

At its foundation, worship is real people meeting a real God, not a patty-cake rehearsal. Where are the psalms of lament, of confession? Is it more than "nice"?

I have experienced God's presence through what seemed like hell, like darkness that was outside of God's reach. But like the psalmist in Psalm 139, I've learned God is there. Always. Life happens, and come what may, God is in the midst of it.

as catalysts to addictive behavior:

> Marriage and family relationships that are consumed by ministry issues, stunting essential relational development and intimacy.

> Simplistic, just-stop-doing-it attitudes toward addiction. Legalistic attitudes within religious communities prevent pastors from seeking expert help and training to address their addiction problem(s).

> Pastoral narcissism. When a pastor believes he is the center of the universe, accountability is a foreign concept. Impervious to fault

and openly hostile to examination and correction, this type of leader is most likely to fall into the entitlement trap.

Perhaps you're thinking, *I can relate to almost every one of the scenarios here. Does that mean I'm going to become a sex addict, an alcoholic, or a drug abuser?* No, the point of examining these dynamics is to prevent addictive behavior from developing.

You may not have been able to choose your family of origin, but you can choose to get help for the negative, emotional legacy still

operating in your life. You may not be able to prevent some church members from putting you on a pedestal, but you can begin to hold yourself to a new standard of honesty: whatever expectations others may have of you, you will refuse to be something you are not.

You may be a people-pleaser, ignoring healthy boundaries and depleting yourself into resentment.

Yet, you can choose to define your identity by God's grace and the gifts God has given you, not what others think.

Finally, you can choose to redefine success the way Jesus does: whatever talents, whatever innate wiring God has given you, developed to their utmost potential. Yes, learn from other ministries, but in the end, you will be your most effective and thus, healthiest, when you pastor incarnationally: digging deep into your own setting, allowing your unique leadership bent to flourish in the never-to-be-repeated context of your community.

Will you need professional counseling and/or mentoring to make healthier choices? Quite possibly. Will the ability to establish healthier patterns come overnight? Not likely. Re-programming lifelong patterns may be a longer process than you think. You only need to take one step right now, and that is to acknowledge that the process needs to begin.

If you have read this article and recognize yourself as a sexual addict (or any other kind of addict), you need to seek help immediately. Your problem is not going to go away by (a) convincing yourself that you don't really have an addiction; (b) telling yourself that your addiction isn't really that bad or (c) escalating your addictive behavior out of a sense of guilt and powerlessness.

You need to explore what in your past or ministry or other lifestyle dynamics might be driving you into destructive behavior. You also need to identify specific events, scenarios, or feelings that tend to trigger an acting-out episode. Most important, you need to get crucial tools for living in healthier ways.

Is it possible that your addictive patterns are severe enough that you will need to leave the pastoral ministry altogether? Yes. My former husband is a prime example of a person whose addictive behavior was at such an advanced, severe stage, he was incapable of managing himself, much less a flock.

Whatever your situation at this point, how-

ever, it is a fact that you are cherished by your Maker, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

You are loved beyond your ability to fathom. The emotional baggage you are carrying as a pastor and/or the addiction that is holding you captive this very moment may actually be the opportunity for you to experience God's love more tangibly than you've ever known. ❁

Resources for Dealing with Sexual Addictions

Sally Morgenthaler recommends:

BOOKS

Contrary to Love: Helping the Sex Addict
Patrick Carnes, Ph.D. (Bantam, 1989)

Don't Call It Love: Recovery From Sexual Addiction
Patrick Carnes (Bantam, 1991)

Escape From Intimacy
Ann Wilson Schaef (HarperSanFrancisco, 1990)

Facing the Shadow: Starting Sexual and Relationship Recovery
Patrick Carnes (Hazelden Information Education, 2001)

Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction
Mark Laaser (Zondervan, 2004)

In the Shadows of the Net: Breaking Free of Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior
Patrick Carnes, ed. (Hazelden Information Education, 2001)

Out of the Shadows
Patrick Carnes (Bantam, 1983)

ORGANIZATIONS

Bethesda Workshops
www.bethesdaworkshops.org

Patrick Carnes Treatment Resources
<http://sexhelp.com>