

**Dear District Superintendent:
Maybe It's Not You!
Your "Problem Pastor"
(or "Problem Parishioner")
May Have a Personality Disorder**

It's often easy for clergy to spot major mental illnesses like profound depression or acute schizophrenia – the symptoms are obvious, the person is miserable and/or out of touch with reality. Another type of psychological disorder, though, is easier to miss: the personality disorder. Churches may suffer more as a result of the actions of personality-disordered individuals, however, because they are difficult to identify, and because they often aren't in distress – instead, *others* (like you, perhaps) are more often in distress *about them*.

In essence, people with personality disorders are, to quote an old joke, "like you and me, only more so." A healthy person has many different feelings, perceptions, relationship styles, and experiences of the world. Someone with a personality disorder seems locked into a particular way of thinking, feeling, relating, or perceiving. This narrow inflexibility is a hallmark of the condition.

For example: you might feel, once in a while, as though you need to be taken care of. At another time you might feel suspicious of the motives of others. Perhaps on another occasion you might feel especially proud of yourself. Once in a while you might feel as though a particular rule might apply to others, but not to you. Or you might have strongly mixed feelings toward another person. Or you might on occasion be determined to be in a good mood, even if it means ignoring unpleasant realities around you.

So far, you're healthy. The more you're locked into *only one* of those frames of mind almost *all the time* (like needing to be taken care of, the first example), the more likely it is that you have a personality disorder. It's not either-or: people fall somewhere on a continuum from complete health at one end to the full disorder at the other; some people have dysfunctional personality "traits" but not the full disorder. Still, it is possible that your "problem pastor" either has the disorder or is on that end of the continuum.

Below is information about how such individuals might be identified ("Features") as well as suggestions for dealing with them ("Resources")

Features

The person has had a history of multiple instances of a certain kind of problem.

This problem is often related to the kind of "narrow inflexibility" described above. A few examples:

- A pastor lives as though rules are for other people, and has a track record to match
- A pastor shows a chronic "us-them" attitude, and has a history of dividing churches
- A pastor seems to expect always to be taken care of, draining churches of energy
- A pastor seems to need ongoing adoration, and punishes churches when they don't
- A pastor insists on a "see no evil" attitude, ignoring every problem until it explodes
- A pastor is erratic in relationships – both unrealistically loving and unrealistically hostile – leaving churches confused and demoralized
- A pastor so focuses on minutiae and perfectionistic detail that s/he paralyzes churches

“Indomitable ignorance” in the face of repeated problems

A personality-disordered person:

- Doesn't "get it" when presented with the pattern of his/her ineffectiveness (or appears to get it, but makes no changes)
- Doesn't learn from pain of past failures
- Doesn't understand his/her contribution to repeated problems
- Takes no "ownership" of problems or the need to make personal changes as solutions

Inappropriate responses when confronted about repeated problems

Examples:

- Imperturbability: "Why are you bothering me? It's not my problem!"
- Happy indifference: "Why are you so upset?" The problems bother us but not him/her
- Blame-shifting: "It's their fault, not mine." His/her explanations of the problem focus on what everyone else didn't do or did wrong or should have done.
- False confession: "I'm sorry you were hurt by the truth." S/he may admit responsibility in vague ways, but when explored, these statements turn out ultimately to blame others.
- Little or no personal regret or remorse. "Yeah, I did it. What of it?" "Of course I did it. I had no choice!"
- Superficial, short term compliance followed by a resumption of previous pattern

Unusual limitations in relationship abilities

Here there is wide variability. What's common is that the person *consistently* relates this way, even when it is *inappropriate* or *self-defeating* to do so

- Consistently comes across *dependently*, even when it is inappropriate or self-defeating to do so
- Consistently comes across *manipulatively*, even when it is inappropriate or self-defeating to do so
- Consistently comes across *confrontively*, even when it is inappropriate or self-defeating to do so
- Consistently comes across in a *self-centered* way, even when it is inappropriate or self-defeating to do so
- Consistently comes across in *erratic* and *volatile* ways, even when it is inappropriate or self-defeating to do so

Note that these individuals typically see themselves quite differently:

- "I'm not dependent, I'm caring."
- "I'm not manipulative, I'm a leader pursuing a vision."
- "I'm not inappropriately confrontive, I'm prophetic."
- "I'm not self-centered, people are unappreciative."
- "I'm not erratic and volatile, I'm in touch with my feelings."

Note also that evidence to the contrary does not change their perceptions more than temporarily. Their sense is that everyone else is mistaken, or has bad motives.

Unusual and off-base perceptions of reality, of how things work, of self-image, etc.

- His/her confidence about "how things are" makes others doubt their perceptions
 - They feel confused and disoriented about what's what
 - Even clear, factual evidence to the contrary does not shake his/her confidence
- His/her sense of self (i.e., "I'm an excellent pastor") is unaffected by results

Resources

The Bad News

The more the person has the full personality disorder, the more the news is bad.

- **“There’s no medicine for not having grown up.”** Psychiatric medications do not exist for most personality disorders, and have limited value where they exist at all
- **“Q: How many psychotherapists does it take to change a light bulb? A:** Only one, but the light bulb has to *want* to change.” Most personality-disordered people do not want to change – though they wouldn’t object if the world changed more to suit them. They usually opt out of psychotherapy quickly unless they feel tremendous pressure to stay – and even then their goal is to get the pressure to stop rather than to make significant personal changes.
- **“The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.”** This psychological truism is especially apt for people with limited and rigid behavior patterns. “One more chance” or reading a self-help book or taking on an accountability partner – all these approaches (and many more) can generally be expected to result in no significant or lasting change. They simply continue the church’s suffering.
- **“How do you see what you can’t see?”** Immersion in scripture or prayer or spiritual direction are similarly unlikely to have a positive impact. Certainly miracles have been known to happen, but the more likely result is that their *interpretation* of scripture or prayer or spiritual direction will simply confirm for them what they’ve believed all along.
- **“No more Mr. Nice Guy.”** The kind of pastoral attitude we prefer to take – optimistic, hopeful, believing the best about people, believing that people will change – is misplaced in dealing with (especially supervising) personality-disordered individuals. In other words, to deal effectively with these people means taking a realistic, matter-of-fact, pragmatic attitude. It can mean severing ties in ways that can be quite painful to the pastor, but are still ultimately best for everyone.

The Good News

- The most important good news is modest, but still quite important: **You can stop the current church’s suffering.** It may be appropriate stewardship to work toward removal of a personality-disordered pastor from active ministry. It may be the best gift to the parish and the denomination.
- **You don’t have to make a diagnosis on your own.** In fact, you shouldn’t. Bring in a competent clinician for a consultation. You may want to talk with the clinician first, getting input from him/her about the approach s/he recommends in the given situation.
- **If you’re not sure where to turn locally, denominational assistance is available.** If you have a “problem person” and want consultation, the DOM’s Advisory Committee on Clergy and Candidacy Assessment may be able to help you locate an appropriate clinical professional.
- **Once in a while, a personality-disordered person beats the odds.** It’s unusual, but it happens. It often happens when the person enters depth therapy with a gifted psychotherapist. The change takes time (years, not months), so the vocational clock may run out first. But change sometimes does happen
- **Sometimes the end is the beginning.** Paradoxically, a personality-disordered pastor who is removed from ministry may “hit bottom” in a way that opens the door to change. Again, it’s unusual. Still, if the pastor makes a commitment to grow from the personal disaster of removal from ministry, change is eventually possible.