

SECTION 3

PROBLEMATIC

With the following case, we continue the practice of including one case study in each volume of *Reflective Practice*. This case is a composite of several actual experiences. The names and genders are altered so that any resemblance to actual situations is coincidental. Our intent in using this case is to examine how the digital age presents new dilemmas for formation and supervision. We are grateful to the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ in the United States for allowing us to print their “Internet Safety Guideline.” We present these guidelines knowing that they will need to be adapted to local contexts and be modified frequently as new technologies introduce new digital possibilities for communication in ministry. We invite readers of this journal to submit case studies to the Editor around the theme of “Virtues in Formation and Supervision” that might be included in Volume 32.

Herbert Anderson
Editor



A Friendly Ark in the Digital Sea: A Case Study

Keith Munson finished a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) the summer before he began his parish internship at First Church in September. Keith is in his mid-40's, married and without children of his own. His wife has three children from a previous marriage—all of whom are either in college or live away from home. Keith is an engaging individual to whom people of all ages are attracted. He became increasingly aware of his impulse to rescue others in need in CPE and entered into spiritual direction shortly after beginning his internship to specifically address that issue. People who are vulnerable and needing love seem to be drawn to Keith. He has a Facebook account under the name “ARK: Almost Rev Keith” and has invited young people in the congregation to “friend” him on Facebook. Keith re-



ported to his spiritual director that a number of young people in the congregation had “friended” him and he was touched by the loneliness and the need to be loved evidenced by so many of them.

Natalie is one of the people who friended Keith. She is a 15-year-old young woman who was born in Korea and adopted by American parents when she was 2 years old—she is their only child. Natalie is very bright and carries on conversations with adults more easily than with her peers. Being the only Asian, she felt very uncomfortable in the church youth group—until Keith arrived. He seemed interested in her ideas and, much to Natalie’s surprise and delight, responded with kindness and understanding when she friended him on Facebook. She found it easy to share her emotions with him. As time went on, Natalie wrote to Keith frequently and increasingly expressed her vulnerably to him.

Natalie’s parents have a policy of periodically checking her Facebook page. The frequency of the exchanges between Natalie and Keith, whom they knew as the Intern at First Church, prompted them to read some of her emails. They were troubled by the revelations from his past that Keith shared with their daughter. Natalie’s mother sent another youth group mother an email in which Keith shared some of his own struggles in high school with isolation and depression.

When her parents confronted her about the exchanges with Keith, Natalie defended him and told her parents that Keith understood her better than anyone else. They were alarmed by Natalie’s anger at them and the support she had been receiving from Keith Munson.

By the time Natalie’s parents reported their concern to Sylvia Smith, the pastor of First Church and Keith’s pastoral supervisor, all the youth group parents knew about the exchanges between Keith and Natalie. Sylvia knew of Keith’s desire to develop a social network with the youth on Facebook, but she was not aware of the level of intimacy of those Facebook friendships and email conversations. Natalie’s parents insist that Keith must be removed from the staff of the congregation because he can no longer be trusted.

Pastor Smith assured Natalie’s parents she would immediately address the matter with Keith to insure the ongoing integrity of the congregation’s pastoral staff. Despite his insistence that there was nothing inappropriate about his exchanges with the young people in general, or Natalie in particular, Pastor Smith asked him to suspend digital communication with the youth until it could be determined whether Keith, because of his impulse to rescue, had violated pastoral boundaries. Following the brief meeting with his pastoral supervisor, Keith made an appointment to see his spiritual director the next day.