

Making Time to Reflect in Order to Learn

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Pastoral supervision of a ministry student comes with a dense admixture of responsibilities made all the more complex by social networking. Recognizing the inherent potential for both good and harm posed by this technology, the Roman Catholic Church and other denominations have developed parish policies to create a safe environment that protects minors from sexual and financial exploitation in the virtual world and other pastoral settings. However, these Internet policies do not routinely address how to safeguard children and youth from other unhealthy relationships.

In this case, the result of not having comprehensive policies to govern the use of social communication in ministry has led to a series of pastoral problems that could have been avoided: The relationship between Natalie and her adoptive parents may be unduly strained. Natalie's peer relationships may be further eroded if her peers hold her responsible for losing the online ministry or for Keith's dismissal from the pastoral staff. The ministerial integrity of the whole pastoral team could be challenged by what Natalie's parents perceive as a breach of trust, especially if Keith is not dismissed from the pastoral team. Keith may have backed himself into a corner, caus-

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ing his seminary to seriously question his suitability for ministry—and Pastor Smith needs to initiate the development of comprehensive guidelines and policies for online ministries before this venue can be reinstated.

It was prudent of the supervising minister to ask Keith to immediately suspend his online communication with the youth. Still, there are a significant number of unknown facts for which she needs qualitative information. Her first concern should be an assessment of Keith's online correspondence with *all* parish youth. Her review of the data may reveal exchanges that other parents might object to as well. On the other hand, she may find that Keith's communications with the youth are within acceptable boundaries—perhaps the fruit of his work with a spiritual director. Either way, Pastor Smith is forced to walk a tightrope when deciding how to address her findings with Keith, Natalie and her parents, the youth group, and the larger parish community regarding the use of online technology.

If there is either explicit or implicit evidence that Keith's self-disclosures to Natalie or his remarks to other youth are inappropriate, Pastor Smith must contact the director of Field Education at his seminary to report the situation. That conversation could assist Pastor Smith and the seminary to determine if the manner and magnitude of Keith's impulse to rescue is cause to terminate his current internship and whether it poses a serious liability for other ministerial settings. Natalie and her parents and the youth group and their parents should be informed of her actions in a timely manner.

However, as this case study is presented, Pastor Smith's next course of action may not be so clearly defined. She seems to be confronted with a situation for which she has no previous experience. There is no indication that she instructed Keith on the use of social networking within the parish setting. There is nothing to suggest that she or another parish pastoral minister either monitored or had access to Keith's Facebook account. The issue here is not that Pastor Smith was negligent of supervisory responsibilities, but it is much more likely that this situation presented a pastoral challenge that she had not anticipated.

Her next steps would benefit from Joseph Levine's view of overcoming mishaps within the process of teaching and learning: "...to really learn from a mistake takes not only time to reflect (on what happened) but also the opportunity to try out the results of our reflection." Apropos to this, Pastor Smith might affirm Keith's desire to be a supportive presence for Natalie, and other parish youth, while explaining that what these young people most need from him is to be a faithful companion, coach, and cheerleader.

This would enable him to assist the youth to develop the self-awareness and interpersonal skills that could help them engage and negotiate with their parents, and others, in ways that are more mutually effective. She might also provide Keith with a copy of the social networking guidelines developed by the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ entitled "Internet Safety Guidelines" (see page 61) and ask him to identify the structural safeguards he would incorporate into his online ministry to make it more pastorally astute and transparent.

In order to help Natalie and her parents reconcile their relationship, Pastor Smith needs to be mindful that simply dismissing Keith or ending parish online ministries will not prevent a similar situation from occurring in the future. While assuring them of the parish's pastoral support for the well-being of their family and apprising them of how she is addressing their concern, she must discern the real issues that underlie their current conflict. Pastor Smith might also need to help them work through the intergenerational strife common to adolescent-parent relationships and/or triangulated relationships that frequently beset blended or multicultural families. It must be clear that she is not trying to defend Keith, but to help the three of them become even more attentive to the particular interpersonal promise and perils of their family.

Finally, as this case is presented, it is clear that the parish did not have well-formulated policies regarding the ministerial use of social networking. In the interest of enhancing the parish's pastoral services, Pastor Smith should not reject the future use of social networking or other forms of digital communication. At the same time, she has to reintroduce this pastoral venue in ways that reassure her parishioners that healthy boundaries and safe church practices are built into the social network design.