



Introduction:

By James D. Craig, PhD, LMFT

The following vignette is an excerpt from an upcoming book by Dr. Craig. It is designed to give pastors, professional therapists, and pastoral caregivers options for dealing with ethical challenges. It is copyrighted and may not be duplicated, edited, or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the author. If you would like to duplicate or transmit any of this material, contact James D. Craig at jcraig@northernlightcc.com.

Pastor Rich Goodman is a thirty-four year-old man, married with two children, evangelical, and outgoing. His youthful good looks and optimism make him a hot commodity in today's pastoral market.

For nearly seven years, the young minister worked at First Community Church, a large multi-staff congregation with a million dollar budget. Though he did a great job leading junior worship and organizing youth activities, he struggled with a nagging sense of inferiority. He wanted to be a real pastor, like Dr. Trevor Longfellow, the Senior Pastor of First Community, who spends his time running to breakfast and lunch meetings, speaking at conferences, and inspiring ever-growing audiences each Sunday morning.

When his old friend Eric Leach was suddenly "called" to a larger congregation three states away, Pastor Rich saw an open door. He sent a resume, and received a positive reply from the board chairman. In less than a month, he found himself behind the wheel of a rental truck, moving his family and furniture into the crumbling two-story brick parsonage next to the Pleasant Grove Community Church.

Pleasant Grove was a rundown rural village with two hundred residents, a small grocery store, and a diner. However, the city was growing out around the small community, and most of the surrounding farm ground had been sold recently to residential developers. Pastor Rich believed the influx of new, affluent residents would open exciting opportunities for church growth.

Over the next four years, things went pretty much as he had envisioned. Hundreds of young families built homes in the new subdivisions around the town, and many began attending the church. A wealthy investor bought the deserted buildings downtown and remodeled them into a quaint, upscale shopping destination. Pleasant Grove Community's attendance quickly doubled.

With this dynamic growth came a flood of people seeking marriage, family, career, and personal counseling. The former youth pastor was quickly overwhelmed. Longtime church members reported severe depression, anxiety, and family dysfunction. New members brought bitter divorce and custody battles, blended family conflicts, defiant children, and impending bankruptcies. Alcohol, marijuana, and prescription drug abuse was common. Hardly a month went by without someone confessing an extramarital affair or an obsession with pornography.

Pastor Rich's clumsy handling of these situations generated conflict at church and at home. Dissatisfied counselees complained to church leaders about the advice he had given, or grumbled when they had trouble reaching him. At the same time, his wife grew increasingly upset as saw him desperately trying (and failing) to meet everyone's expectations.



Though Pastor Rich was overwhelmed and increasingly discouraged, he still bristled when someone suggested he refer the "crazy people" to a "shrink". He noticed that most of those who came to him had already visited a variety of medical and mental health professionals. Many could not afford private counseling, and almost everyone complained that the low-cost therapists at the regional mental health center were hopelessly inexperienced, incoherent, and openly hostile to the Christian faith.

At his wife's urging, Pastor Rich set some much-needed boundaries. He dedicated five hours each week for counseling "by appointment only", recruited two talented church members-Dan Howard and Sally McKay-to be "lay counselors", and began referring especially severe cases to Dr. Jerry Brown, a Christian psychologist and member of his church.

Dr. Jerry Brown is a licensed psychologist and a member of Pleasant Grove Community Church. His main office is located in a remodeled building on the town square, but he also sees clients at the church. Pastor Rich often asks Dr. Brown to see cases he believes are "over his head".

Though he has no theological training beyond Sunday school, Dr. Brown represents himself as a Christian Psychologist who integrates biblical faith and social science. Dr. Jerry, as he likes to be called, is often asked to speak at church-sponsored marriage retreats, family camps, pastors' meetings, and other occasions where a Christian Psychologist is in demand.

Jerry grew up in a big family on the east coast, the youngest of seven children. His father was a heart surgeon, and his mother a homemaker. Nominally Roman Catholic, the Browns attended services infrequently and generally discouraged the kids from "becoming fanatics" about their faith.

When Jerry was a senior in college, he fell head over heels for Kimberly-a gorgeous brunette who was deeply involved in a conservative Christian campus ministry. Primarily to please her, the young man accompanied her to church and small group Bible studies. Surrounded by enthusiastic Christian friends and buoyed by Kimberly's love, Jerry accepted Christ as his personal savior and was baptized. When they became engaged and announced their wedding would be held at Kimberly's home church, Jerry's parents were angry. To smooth their ruffled feathers, he convinced Kimberly to allow their priest to take part in the service.

Jerry's life was balanced precariously between two competing world-views. His wife and newfound Christian friends urged him to make biblical Christianity the center of his life. His professors, outspoken proponents of Darwinism and scientific rationalism, pressed him to see religion as a psychological crutch. In his mind, he "integrated" both by participating in campus ministry events on Sunday and keeping his religious views to himself the rest of the week.

With a brand new Ph.D. and an offer to become Clinical Director at the new regional mental health center, Dr. Jerry, Kimberly, and their infant daughter Jennifer moved to Pleasant Grove. Kimberly shopped the churches and found Pleasant Grove Community Church to be most like her home church. For next three years, she took care of her young family and worked for a home healthcare agency while her husband labored to keep his administrators, therapists, and clients happy.



Dr. Jerry spent twelve hours a day dealing with court-ordered, drug and alcohol addicted, violent, threatening, suicidal, hopeless patients; small-minded, egocentric staff members; and endless bureaucratic paperwork. He became increasingly agitated, depressed, and unable to sleep. He gained sixty pounds. His doctor prescribed an antidepressant and a sleep aid. He began drinking heavily. Desperately unhappy, with Kimberly threatening to leave him, Dr. Jerry decided to quit his job at the mental health center. His wife took a full time job at the hospital, providing the added income and insurances needed to support the family while her husband started a private practice.

Dan Howard is a fifty-eight year old retired teacher and an experienced small group leader in his church. Dan was born and raised in Pleasant Grove. His dad was the only mechanic in town, operating a busy repair shop just off the town square. Dan graduated from Pleasant Grove High School and enrolled at a small Christian liberal arts college two states away. Unlike most of his PGHS classmates, Dan returned to marry his hometown sweetheart and settle in the tiny rural hamlet. He taught math at the high school for nearly thirty years and coached the women's volleyball team.

Dan loved the church. Though his father disapproved, his mother took him to worship every Sunday. The sanctuary became a place where he came to know a Father who really loved and cared for him. He developed close ties with the student pastors who started their careers at PGCC. Several of them encouraged him to consider studying for the ministry.

When he told his parents he was thinking about majoring in theology, his father let loose a string of profanities and screamed, "You'll never make any money doing that!" His mother, always trying to buffer the effects of his father's cruelty, hugged her disillusioned son and began to weep. Sensing he was responsible for his father's rage, and knowing he would never pay tuition for him to study theology, Dan decided to major in math education.

Through most of his adult life, Dan managed to remain oblivious to his father's alcoholism and multiple affairs. When the old man died of lung cancer, his mother shared some of the family secrets. These revelations revived his interest in ministry. But it was the unexpected death of his wife that pushed him to take action. On the way home from a sectional tournament, a drunk driver hit the school bus carrying the PGHS volleyball team. Dan's wife Meredith, who often traveled with team, was pinned in the wreckage and died before rescue workers could free her.

The funeral was held in the PGHS school gymnasium, and about two thousand people attended. Fellow staff and students expressed their sympathy at school, while friends from church called and provided meals every evening. This outpouring of concern lasted for about six weeks. Then, as if someone had flipped a switch, the calls, cards, and visits stopped. Everyone seemed to be saying, "It's time to move on."

Dan felt abandoned and alone. He could not sleep. And when he did manage to doze off (with the help of three glasses of wine), he experienced vivid nightmares. He seriously considered taking his own life. Worried he was losing his mind, he called his family doctor, who prescribed an antidepressant and referred him to Dr. Jerry Brown, a psychologist affiliated with PGCC. The medicine seemed to help him sleep, while the weekly meeting with Dr. Brown gave him a place to work through his grief and trauma. A year after Meredith's death, Dan felt substantially recovered.



He also began to sense that God was calling him to a ministry of counseling—a call he believed was confirmed by Pastor Rich's invitation to join the lay counseling team.

Dan knew he needed some additional training, but he was unwilling to spend the money and time needed to secure a traditional masters degree. Besides, he believed his years of teaching and coaching, as well as his tragic personal experience qualified him better than any university could. Surfing the Web one day, Dan found a site that offered an MBC—Master of Biblical Counseling—that could be completed via email in just sixteen weeks. Dan typed in his credit card number, wrote the required essays over the summer, and printed out an attractive, professional-looking diploma.

Sally McKay is thirty-three, divorced, and the mother of two elementary school age daughters. She leads the Caregivers Ministry, a group of women who visit members of PGCC when they are in the hospital. A hard-working sales representative for a luxury homes builder, she dreams of the day when she can move her children to a lovely home like the ones she sells.

Sally and her (then) husband Bob, a heavy equipment operator, moved to Pleasant Grove ten years ago. A confirmed stay-at-home mom who grew up in a conservative preacher's home, she made sure she and the girls were in church every Sunday. When church members asked about Bob, Sally would say something like, "He wanted to be here today, but was feeling ill."

The truth was a bit more disturbing. Monday through Thursday, Bob spent evenings sitting in his leather recliner, drinking beer and watching TV. On Friday nights, he went out with his buddies to a bar somewhere in the city. Saturdays and Sundays were dedicated to sleeping in, watching ball games, and pressing for "personal time" with Sally. Bob usually insisted she put the kids to bed early, have a few beers with him, and watch pornographic videos "to loosen up". If she refused, he would call her filthy names, accuse her of having an affair, and remind her sanctimoniously that the Bible requires her to meet his sexual needs.

Quietly, Sally endured what only the spouse of an alcoholic can understand. She reached her limit on a bright, cool Sunday afternoon in late October. Hurrying out for a fresh six-pack at halftime, Bob backed over the children's new Black Labrador puppy. Sally heard their screams and ran outside to find her husband's pickup truck sitting in the middle of the front yard, two horrified children trying desperately to pull their puppy from under the back left wheel, and Bob standing over them yelling it was their fault for letting the dog play so close to the driveway.

In a moment of clarity and courage, Sally sprinted to the truck, yanked the keys from the ignition, and threw them up on the roof. Gathering up her children, she ran back inside, locked the doors, and called the sheriff. When the deputy arrived fifteen minutes later, he found Bob screaming threats and attempting to kick-in the front door. Using his nightstick in quick, chopping motions, he knocked Bob down, handcuffed him, and took him to jail. The next morning, still shaking from the experience, Sally called an attorney and filed for divorce.

She anticipated her parents' disapproval, so she was not surprised when they lectured her about the sanctity of marriage and forgiveness. But she was shocked at the response of some of her Christian friends. One said bluntly "Aren't you over-reacting? It was just a dog." Another



suggested, "Maybe if you were a more submissive wife, he would be happier and not drink so much."

Sally was bewildered. She could not see that she had actually invited their remarks by covering up Bob's drinking and downplaying his abuse. She never told anyone how much he drank, or that he forced her to imitate scenes from pornographic videos, or that he spent Friday nights in a strip club, or that she had been treated for a sexually transmitted disease Bob swore must have come from a toilet seat. Thanks to Sally's soft descriptions, her friends and family pictured Bob as an imperfect man who deserved another chance. Well-intentioned yet still blind to her enabling ways, Sally continues her one-woman crusade to help other Christian women struggling with abusive relationships.

Pastor Eric Leach no longer lives or works in Pleasant Grove, but his influence has left an indelible mark on the counseling ministry at PCGG. Four years ago, Pastor Eric was suddenly "called" to another church amid allegations of sexual misconduct. Though his ministry was turbulent, many in the community still consider him the finest pastor and counselor they have ever met. Sadly yet truthfully, Pastor Eric set the standard by which Pastor Rich and the rest of the PGCC counseling staff are judged.