

Three Case Studies

Case Study A

A newly ordained minister has been serving for six months as an assistant minister in a large church setting. The highly respected senior minister has been at the church for many years. The senior minister and spouse are generally beloved by the congregation. A congregant comes to the assistant minister for counseling and asks, "Whatever I tell you in private is confidential, right?" to which the assistant minister responds, "Yes, of course." The congregant divulges that they have been having a consensual affair with the senior minister, which the senior minister has now ended, saying the affair was wrong and "out of character." The congregant does not want anyone else to know nor does the congregant want the senior minister to know that the congregant has told the assistant minister. The congregant simply wants support in dealing with their feelings of loss and rejection. The assistant minister feels bound by the promise of confidentiality but also feels uneasy carrying this information alone.

Questions

- If you were the assistant minister, how would you handle this situation?
- Would you keep the congregant's confidence?
- What type of secret is this?
- Is this a matter of privacy or secrecy?
- Is there an abuse of power involved?
- How might your obligations to the

congregant and obligations to the church as a whole be in conflict?

- What are the confidentiality issues here?
- What matters of judgment should enter into the decision?
- How might William Rankin's four guidelines (see page 31) help with your decision?
- Who might you go to for advice?

Suppose that after careful deliberation you first divulge the information to the senior minister, without naming names. The senior minister admits the affair but says that it has never happened before and will never happen again. The senior minister asks you not to act on this information, citing the desire to avoid a congregational rift, hurting their spouse, and further pain for the congregant involved.

- Does this conversation change anything about your decision?
- If you substitute a board president for the assistant minister in the above scenario, what changes, if anything?

Case Study B

Ruth facilitates a church covenant group that is intended as support for members of the church who are primary care-givers for chronically ill family members. Ruth is the primary care-giver for her father, who has Alzheimer's. Ruth is good friends with a couple, John and Mary, who are also members of the church. Mary is confined to a wheelchair, the result of a tragic accident several years earlier, and John is her primary

care-giver. Both John and Mary maintain outwardly that her disability is no impediment to a vigorous lifestyle, and from all appearances, the couple enjoy a full and happy life. Privately, however, John has confided to Ruth that there are times when he really doesn't know if he can carry on, that caring for all Mary's needs has reduced him to an asexual "nurse." John says that he would like to attend the covenant group but he knows that Mary would be mortified if she thought John was talking about her to other church members. John tells Ruth, "Mary doesn't think of me as her *care-giver*" and asks Ruth if she could keep his participation in the group a secret. Ruth is genuinely concerned for John's mental health and knows that John would benefit from attending the group.

Questions

- If you were Ruth what would you do?
- What kinds of secrets are involved in this scenario and whose are they?
- What confidentiality issues are involved?
- What matters of judgment would enter into your decision?
- Are William Rankin's four guidelines (see page 31) helpful in sorting out this dilemma?
- Who might you ask for advice and how would you ask?

Case Study C

Tom and Dick have been close friends and members of the same church for many years. Tom is currently serving as the president of the Board of Trustees and Dick is the treasurer, also an elected position. Dick's wife, Ann, has been battling breast and related cancers for many years. Dick comes to Tom and confesses that he has been "borrowing" money from church funds to pay his wife's heavy medical bills. The church is due to have an outside audit in the next month. Dick asks Tom if he could find a way to delay the audit until Dick has had a chance to pay back the money he has taken

from the church. Dick assures Tom that he will be able to pay the money back in two months when certain investments come to maturity. All Tom's experience of Dick leads him to believe that Dick is a trustworthy man. Tom himself has confessed transgressions to Dick in the past and Dick has never betrayed his confidence. Dick gently reminds Tom of this fact saying, "You have trusted me with your secrets in the past and I have never let you down. Help me out on this one please, Tom. I swear to you I will make this good."

Tom is torn by his friendship with Dick, his concern for Ann, and his duty to the church. He wonders if waiting a few weeks to do the audit would cause any harm. His feelings are further complicated by the fact that he recently read of a similar situation in the newspaper. At a church of a different denomination the church administrator was caught embezzling church funds. When the church discovered this, the church was torn apart by opposing reactions. Half the church had wanted to give the administrator the chance to pay back the money. The other half of the church had wanted to prosecute. News had leaked out, the police had been called in, and now half the members had left the church and started a new one. Tom worries that whatever he decides to do, there will be church members upset with him.

Questions

- If you were Tom, what would you do?
- What kinds of secrets are involved in this scenario?
- What issues of confidentiality are involved?
- What matters of judgment would enter into your decision?
- What values?
- Are William Rankin's four guidelines (see page 31) helpful in sorting out this dilemma?
- Who might you ask for advice and how would you ask?