A CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP RESOURCE
A PASTORAL RELATIONSHIP RESOURCE

After the Apology

Helping a Congregation Receive Repair, Practice Grace, and Move Forward

BY LORNE BOSTWICK



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A PASTORAL RELATIONSHIP RESOURCE

Pastors make mistakes.

They communicate poorly. They become defensive. They make decisions without listening carefully enough. They avoid conversations they should have initiated. They speak impatiently, misread situations, disappoint people, and discover that their actions have caused harm they did not intend.

These failures matter.

They may cause genuine hurt. They may require an apology, changed behavior, restitution, clearer expectations, or renewed accountability.

Sometimes that work happens.

The pastor recognizes what went wrong, accepts responsibility, apologizes, attempts repair, and changes what needs to change.

And still the congregation cannot move forward.

Most members may be ready to continue, but a few keep the failure alive. The story circulates through parking-lot conversations, private messages, prayer requests, staff relationships, and informal networks. New decisions are interpreted through the old event. Evidence of change is discounted. The original failure becomes the explanation for everything the pastor does.

The pastor may have completed the work accountability requires while the congregation has not yet begun the work reconciliation requires.

At that point, the church faces a different question.

The question is no longer only:

> **Has the pastor taken responsibility?**

It is also:

> **Will the congregation take responsibility for receiving repair and practicing grace?**

When This Resource Applies

Some pastoral failures involve abuse, exploitation, serious boundary violations, fiduciary misconduct, illegal behavior, retaliation, or persistent patterns of harmful conduct. These situations require formal accountability and appropriate ecclesial, employment, safeguarding, or legal processes.

Grace must never be used to silence those who have been harmed, suppress legitimate concerns, bypass due process, or protect a pastor from necessary consequences.

But not every pastoral mistake is misconduct.

Many are the consequential but ordinary failures of imperfect people exercising leadership in complicated human communities.

This resource addresses what happens after such a failure has been responsibly addressed:

- The concern has been heard.
- The pastor has acknowledged appropriate responsibility.
- An apology or other repair has been offered.
- Necessary changes have been made or are underway.
- No allegation requiring formal action is being ignored.
- The remaining difficulty is the congregation's inability or unwillingness to receive repair and move forward.

This distinction matters.

A congregation should never be rushed toward reconciliation before truth and accountability. But neither should it preserve a repaired failure as though no accountability or repair has occurred.

A Pastoral Relationship Requires Two Parties

Congregations usually understand what pastors owe them.

Pastors should listen carefully, exercise good judgment, communicate clearly, behave responsibly, acknowledge mistakes, apologize sincerely, and change their conduct when change is needed.

These are legitimate expectations.

But the pastoral relationship does not place every responsibility on the pastor. It is a relationship between pastor and congregation, held within the care and accountability of the wider church.

The pastor cannot create the health of that relationship alone.

A pastor can listen, apologize, repair, change, and return to the relationship in good faith. But if the congregation—or an influential group within it—refuses repair, preserves accusation, and continues defining the pastor through a past failure, the relationship cannot function.

The pastor may still occupy the position. Worship may continue. Meetings may be held. Sermons may be preached. Yet beneath the visible life of the church, the covenantal relationship has begun to collapse.

Mutual responsibility does not mean equal blame.

The pastor may bear primary responsibility for the original rupture. If the pastor caused harm, that harm must be acknowledged and addressed.

But once the pastor has taken responsibility and offered appropriate repair, the congregation becomes responsible for its response. If it refuses every movement toward repair, then it bears responsibility for the continuing dysfunction.

The original injury may belong primarily to the pastor.

The refusal of reconciliation may belong primarily to the congregation.

These are different responsibilities arising at different moments in the same relationship.

Grace Is a Congregational Responsibility

The church is not merely an organization that employs someone to proclaim grace to others. It is the Body of Christ, called to embody the grace it has received.

> **Grace is not something congregations hire pastors to practice on their behalf. It is a responsibility of the whole Body of Christ.**

The church gathers because God has reconciled people who could not create reconciliation for themselves.

It baptizes people into a new identity.

It proclaims forgiveness.

It shares a Table where no one participates by virtue of perfection.

It prays, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

It depends upon mercy every time it calls itself the Body of Christ.

A congregation cannot proclaim these truths liturgically while refusing to embody them relationally.

A congregation is not required to ignore harm. But neither is it faithful to preserve a repaired failure as a permanent accusation or allow it to become the pastor's new perceived identity.

This does not mean an apology erases consequences. It does not mean trust must immediately return. It does not mean people must stop feeling hurt. It does not mean every pastoral relationship can or should continue.

It means that when responsibility has been taken, appropriate repair has been attempted, and changed behavior is visible, the congregation has a Christian responsibility to let those realities become part of the story.

A congregation cannot faithfully demand repentance and then behave as though repentance changes nothing.

When a Failure Becomes a Name

Congregations possess considerable power to name their pastors.

A communication mistake becomes:

Our pastor is dishonest.

A defensive response becomes:

Our pastor does not care about people.

A poorly considered decision becomes:

Our pastor cannot be trusted.

An avoided conversation becomes:

Our pastor is a coward.

A moment of impatience becomes:

Our pastor is cruel.

These conclusions may begin with something that actually happened. But the distance between naming an action and naming a person can become very short.

Once that name settles into the congregation, it becomes an interpretive lens. Ambiguous behavior confirms it. New disagreements are attached to it. Changed behavior is dismissed as temporary or insincere. Even unrelated decisions become further evidence that the congregation's judgment was right.

The pastor is no longer permitted to be a person who made a mistake.

The pastor becomes the mistake.

This is not only an organizational problem. It is a theological one.

Christian faith insists that human beings are responsible for their actions. It also insists that no human being is reducible to a single action, failure, or season of life.

The church must not confuse accountability with the power to give someone a permanent new name.

Remembering Is Not the Same as Rehearsing

Grace does not require forgetting.

A congregation may need to remember what happened so that it can retain what it learned. Leaders may need to clarify expectations, improve communication, establish better practices, or remain attentive to whether promised changes continue.

Remembering says:

> **This happened. It mattered. Responsibility was taken. Repair was attempted. We learned from it.**

Rehearsing says:

> **This happened, and we must keep telling it so that no one forgets what kind of person the pastor really is.**

Remembering preserves wisdom.

Rehearsing preserves accusation.

Remembering allows the event to become part of the congregation's history.

Rehearsing makes the event the controlling interpretation of the pastor's identity.

A repaired failure should not be narrated again and again as though nothing has happened since.

When repentance and repair are real, grace must eventually change the way the congregation tells the story.

The faithful story is not:

> **Nothing happened.**

Nor is it:

> **What happened tells us everything we need to know about our pastor.**

The fuller story is:

> **Something happened. It caused harm. Our pastor accepted responsibility. Repair was attempted. Change followed. We are learning how to continue together.**

If the congregation tells the failure but continually omits the responsibility, repair, and change that followed, it is no longer telling the whole truth.

When a True Story Bears False Witness

The commandment against bearing false witness concerns more than inventing facts. It calls the community to speak truthfully about its neighbors and to resist damaging another person's reputation through distortion.

A story may contain accurate facts and still communicate something untrue about the whole person.

A congregation may repeat what the pastor once said while omitting the apology.

It may describe a poor decision while omitting the later correction.

It may recount the harm while omitting the attempt at repair.

It may preserve the worst moment while refusing to acknowledge evidence of growth.

The individual facts may be true. The identity created through their selective repetition may be false.

The church bears false witness when it tells a person's failure in a way that refuses to include repentance, repair, or changed life.

Accountability requires the truth about what happened.

Grace requires the fuller truth about what happened afterward.

Forgiveness Is More Than a Feeling

People cannot be ordered to stop feeling hurt.

Some members may need more time than others. Trust may return slowly. A person may accept an apology while still carrying disappointment, anger, grief, or caution.

Church leaders should not pressure someone to claim forgiveness they do not yet feel. They should not use Christian language to suppress questions, silence criticism, or avoid further accountability.

But there is a difference between having unresolved feelings and behaving in ways that keep the entire congregation organized around a grievance.

A member may still feel hurt.

That does not give the member unlimited permission to circulate the story, recruit allies, attach the old failure to every new disagreement, undermine the pastor's leadership, demand repeated apologies, or treat repair as though it never occurred.

Forgiveness cannot be coerced, but conduct within the Body of Christ remains accountable to the Body.

A member may need time before forgiveness is felt. The congregation cannot surrender its common life to the indefinite rehearsal of an accusation.

Repair Must Be Allowed to Matter

Sometimes congregations ask pastors to accept responsibility but leave no possible path beyond the accusation.

The pastor apologizes, but the apology is dismissed.

The pastor changes a behavior, but the change is treated as performance.

The pastor makes restitution, but the original failure remains the only meaningful evidence.

The pastor listens repeatedly, but the same grievance returns without new information or a new request.

When no apology can be sufficient, no repair can be meaningful, and no change can count, accountability has lost its proper purpose.

Christian accountability should be ordered toward truth, safety, repair, growth, and the health of the community. It should not become an indefinite sentence.

Allowing repair to matter does not guarantee that everything returns to the way it was. The pastoral relationship may change. Trust may need to be rebuilt. Expectations may need to become clearer.

But repair must be permitted to alter the relationship.

If nothing the pastor does can change the congregation's judgment, then the congregation is no longer practicing accountability.

It is preserving condemnation.

When Grievance Organizes the Congregation

An unresolved pastoral conflict rarely remains between the people who were initially involved.

Members begin choosing sides.

Some believe they are defending the pastor.

Others believe they are defending the congregation.

Some believe forgiveness is required.

Others fear that forgiveness will minimize the harm.

Some want the conflict resolved.

Others may begin finding influence, belonging, or purpose in keeping it alive.

People who were not present acquire strong conclusions from partial accounts. Routine decisions become evidence. Sermons are heard as coded messages. Staff changes are interpreted as retaliation. Apologies become either vindication or manipulation.

The original issue becomes the event around which older loyalties, anxieties, grievances, and struggles for influence organize themselves.

The pastor becomes the visible object of a conflict that increasingly belongs to the congregation.

To one group, the pastor may represent needed change, progress, or hope.

To another, the pastor may represent loss, disrespect, threatened tradition, or leadership that cannot be trusted.

The congregation is no longer responding only to the pastor's behavior.

It is conducting an internal conflict through the pastor.

Once camps have formed, leaders should not institutionalize the division by giving each faction equal authority indefinitely. Nor should they divide the church into good people and bad people. Each group may contain legitimate concerns, partial truths, fear, loyalty, and distorted interpretations.

The responsibility of leaders is to refuse the premise that the congregation must remain organized as opposing camps.

They may need to say:

> *"We will not ask everyone to agree about every aspect of what happened. We will ask everyone to participate in the congregation's life without recruiting others into continuing conflict."*

And:

> *"No group has the authority to make its interpretation of this event the permanent identity of the pastor or the congregation."*

Reconciliation does not require uniform interpretation.

It requires a shared commitment not to weaponize disagreement.

The Responsibility of Congregational Leaders

When a repaired failure continues to circulate through the congregation, silence from its leaders is not neutral.

It allows informal networks to become an alternative system of judgment. It permits the loudest or least forgiving voices to define the congregation's interpretation of what occurred. It leaves the pastor responsible not only for the original mistake and repair, but also for persuading every dissatisfied person to release the grievance.

That is not a responsibility the pastor can carry alone.

Once the appropriate leaders have determined that the matter has been responsibly addressed, they must help the congregation receive that reality.

Depending upon the church's structure, this responsibility may belong to the session, council, vestry, board, personnel committee, pastor-relations committee, or other recognized lay leadership.

These leaders should:

- Determine whether the original concern has received an appropriate response.
- Make certain that no allegation requiring formal action is being ignored.
- Communicate that responsibility has been taken and repair is underway.
- Provide an appropriate channel for genuinely new information or unresolved concerns.
- Interrupt gossip, triangulation, and repeated informal accusation.
- Correct distorted or incomplete accounts where confidentiality permits.
- Address members whose conduct is preventing the congregation from moving forward.
- Protect the pastor from ongoing retaliation or reputational punishment.
- Allow evidence of changed behavior to become part of the congregation's judgment.
- Seek outside help when the governing body cannot maintain these boundaries.

Lay leaders are not being asked to defend the pastor against every criticism.

They are being asked to tend the moral, relational, and theological life of the congregation.

Interrupting the Grapevine

Persistent grievances often survive because no one with recognized authority interrupts them.

Leaders listen sympathetically but say nothing.

Staff members absorb complaints without directing them anywhere.

Friends repeat the story as concern.

People form conclusions from information they cannot verify.

Eventually, the congregation's informal story carries more authority than the accountability and repair that actually occurred.

Leaders should resist becoming passive participants in that process.

When someone repeats an addressed grievance, a leader might say:

> *"I know that what happened was painful. The pastor has acknowledged it, apologized, and taken steps to address it. If you have new information or believe something remains unresolved, I will help you bring it to the appropriate leaders. But continuing to circulate the grievance informally is not helping the congregation heal."*

When someone attempts to recruit a leader into a private conversation about the pastor:

> *"What are you asking me to do with what you are telling me? If this requires action, we need to bring it through the appropriate channel. If it does not, I do not want to help keep the conflict alive by repeating it."*

When the original mistake is attached to a new and unrelated disagreement:

> *"We need to consider this decision on its own merits. The earlier concern was addressed. We should not use it as the explanation for everything the pastor does."*

When changed behavior is continually discounted:

> *"What evidence would allow change to count? If no apology, repair, or future behavior could affect the conclusion, then we may no longer be discussing accountability."*

When the congregation needs clear leadership:

> *"We asked the pastor to take responsibility for what belonged to the pastor. The pastor has done that. We must now take responsibility for what belongs to us."*

The Responsibility of Other Staff

Other staff members can help stabilize a congregation after a pastoral mistake. They can also intensify the conflict.

Staff should not become alternative centers of opposition, carry grievances between parties, use the pastor's mistake to strengthen their own position, or allow staff relationships to organize around resentment.

Nor should staff be expected to defend the pastor personally or suppress legitimate concerns.

Their responsibility is to support appropriate communication, direct concerns toward responsible leaders, refuse triangulation, and honor the congregation's decisions about accountability and repair.

When staff members continue to rehearse an addressed failure, their conduct should be treated as a staff and leadership concern. Their position gives their words particular influence within the system.

The Responsibility of the Presbytery

Sometimes a session understands its responsibility but needs support carrying it out.

Sometimes the session is divided.

Sometimes influential members resist its leadership.

Sometimes the pastor's original mistake has become entangled with older congregational conflicts.

Sometimes the session itself participates in preserving the accusation.

In these situations, the presbytery or other denominational body must help the congregation recognize its responsibility within the pastoral relationship.

A presbytery leader, Commission on Ministry representative, or other trusted outside leader can say what the pastor cannot credibly say alone:

- The pastor has accepted appropriate responsibility.
- Repair and changed behavior must be allowed to matter.
- The congregation has obligations within the pastoral relationship.
- Continued informal punishment is damaging the church.
- New concerns should be addressed through appropriate channels.
- Old accusations should not be continually relitigated.
- Reconciliation requires something from the congregation as well as the pastor.

The pastor should not be forced to make the case for their own forgiveness.

Outside leadership may be necessary precisely because the congregation needs to hear that extending grace is not a personal favor it may grant or withhold without consequence.

It is part of the church's vocation.

Presbyteries can also reinforce congregational dysfunction when they treat each pastoral rupture as an isolated problem involving the current pastor. They help negotiate an exit, appoint an interim, conduct a mission study, and begin another search without confronting the system that contributed to the collapse.

Presbytery responsibility cannot begin and end with helping a wounded pastor leave.

It must include helping the congregation understand what it will carry into its next pastoral relationship if nothing changes.

When Leaders Need to Say "Enough"

There comes a point when continued rehearsal of a repaired failure must be addressed directly.

"Enough" does not mean that no one may speak of the event again.

It means:

- Enough informal accusation.
- Enough recruiting others into the grievance.
- Enough using the past to control every present decision.
- Enough repeating partial accounts.
- Enough demanding that the pastor perform repentance indefinitely.
- Enough treating one failure as the pastor's permanent name.

Church leaders may need to tell an individual:

> *"You are entitled to speak honestly about your experience. You are not entitled to make that experience the permanent name by which the congregation knows another person."*

They may also need to ask:

> *"Can you remain part of this congregation without working against the repair and reconciliation its leaders have affirmed?"*

This is a serious question, but it is not punitive.

No individual member possesses the authority to make their inability or unwillingness to forgive the governing identity of the whole church.

When Dysfunction Displaces Call

A healthy pastoral transition can be an expression of vocation.

A pastor may recognize that God is calling them elsewhere. A congregation's needs may change. New leadership may be emerging for a new season. Pastor and congregation may recognize, with gratitude and grief, that their ministry together has reached its natural conclusion.

That is different from a pastor leaving because an addressed failure was never allowed to become repaired.

In such circumstances, the language of transition can conceal what has actually occurred. The pastor may formally accept another call or resign, but the departure functions more like a divorce produced by unresolved relational dysfunction.

The pastor leaves not because call has been faithfully discerned, but because remaining has become psychologically, relationally, or vocationally impossible.

The congregation may explain the departure as evidence that the pastor was never committed, was not a good fit, or simply felt called elsewhere. The underlying system escapes examination.

Nothing is repaired.

Congregational leaders and presbyteries have a responsibility to intervene before departure becomes the only available relief. They must protect the possibility that decisions about pastoral call will be shaped by prayerful discernment rather than accumulated resentment, informal punishment, or institutional avoidance.

The pastoral relationship does not belong to the pastor alone. It is a covenant entrusted to pastor, congregation, and the wider church.

When any party refuses its responsibility for truth, repair, grace, and reconciliation, the relationship becomes distorted.

When those with authority refuse to address that distortion, call itself can become a casualty of dysfunction.

When the Conflict Outlives the Pastor

The departure of the pastor does not necessarily end the conflict.

Removing the pastor may initially bring relief. The visible object of the congregation's anxiety is gone. Members may hope that a new pastor will restore peace, rebuild trust, and reunite the church.

But if the congregation has not examined the way it handles grievance, authority, forgiveness, and repair, the same division may reappear in the next pastoral relationship.

New members learn which stories must be believed.

New elders inherit unresolved loyalties.

Staff members learn which people cannot be challenged.

Families remember how earlier pastors treated them.

A new pastor is quietly assigned a role within a conflict that began before their arrival.

The names of the camps may change, but the underlying division survives.

The congregation may come to describe itself as having experienced a succession of difficult pastors. It may not recognize that it has been the continuing participant in every one of those relationships.

The system manages its anxiety by locating the problem in the current pastor:

If the pastor communicated better, we would be healthy.

If the pastor apologized more sincerely, we could heal.

If the pastor were less defensive, the conflict would end.

If the pastor left, peace would return.

The pastor may indeed have made mistakes. But focusing exclusively on those mistakes protects the congregation from examining its own patterns.

When one pastor leaves, the system eventually seeks another person to carry its unresolved conflict. The interim pastor, the next installed pastor, a staff member, or a lay leader becomes the new identified problem.

The congregation changes pastors without changing its way of relating.

A presbytery should therefore ask:

- What conflict preceded this pastor?
- What camps have formed?
- What stories does each camp tell about the congregation?

- Which members or families exercise informal authority?
- How have previous pastoral relationships ended?
- What accusations recur across different pastors?
- What happens when leaders challenge the dominant grievance?
- Is the current pastor the cause of the conflict, a participant in it, or its latest identified object?
- What must the congregation address before another pastoral relationship can be healthy?

Sometimes the most faithful action is not helping a congregation call another pastor quickly.

It is requiring a period of honest systemic work so the next pastor is not called into an inherited conflict.

Interrupting the Cycle

The destructive sequence is often recognizable:

> **A mistake becomes an accusation.**
> **The accusation becomes an identity.**
> **The identity divides the congregation.**
> **The division makes ministry impossible.**
> **The pastor leaves.**
> **The system survives.**
> **The next pastor inherits it.**

This sequence is not inevitable.

Congregational leaders can interrupt it.

Staff members can refuse to participate in it.

Presbyteries can recognize it before another pastoral relationship becomes its casualty.

Members can choose not to make grievance a source of belonging.

The church can tell the truth about harm while also telling the truth about repentance, repair, change, and grace.

Moving Forward Is Part of the Work of Grace

Moving forward does not mean pretending that nothing happened.

It means keeping the learning without preserving the accusation.

It means allowing an apology to be more than words spoken into a void.

It means allowing changed behavior to become evidence.

It means refusing to make yesterday's failure the only story the congregation can tell about today.

It means remembering that the pastor is a human being: responsible, imperfect, capable of harm, capable of repentance, capable of growth, and still more than a single moment.

The pastor has responsibilities within the pastoral relationship.

So does the congregation.

So does the wider church.

When a pastor has told the truth, accepted responsibility, offered an appropriate apology, attempted repair, and demonstrated change, the congregation must decide what kind of community it will be.

Will it continue rehearsing the failure as a permanent accusation?

Will it allow a few members to give the pastor a new name and require the entire congregation to use it?

Will its leaders allow unresolved grievance to determine whether the pastoral relationship can survive?

Will the presbytery help the congregation address its system, or merely help another wounded pastor leave it?

Or will the church tell the fuller truth—the truth about harm, accountability, repentance, repair, grace, and the possibility of continuing faithfully?

The church does not honor truth by refusing grace.

It does not honor grace by avoiding truth.

The calling of the Body of Christ is to hold them together.

Perhaps the question congregational leaders finally need to ask is this:

> **What would it mean for us to honor the repair that has occurred, hold one another accountable for the way we speak and act, and resume the ministry God has entrusted to us together?**