

In the News

Prestonwood Baptist Church

Editorial: Prestonwood Church does the right thing

12:00 AM CDT on Sunday, May 25, 2008

It is quite possibly a church's worst nightmare: a minister caught in sexual impropriety involving a child.

We've seen this play out time and time again over the past few years, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church. Bishop Kevin Farrell, the new Catholic ordinary in Dallas, told this newspaper's Sam Hodges recently that the diocese is short of money. The bishop didn't elaborate, but one reason for the financial shortfall is the tens of millions of dollars paid out locally to clerical sex abuse victims. And it's impossible to put a dollar figure on the loss of trust and confidence in church authorities.

Why has it been so difficult for the institutional leaders in churches to understand what's at stake for their credibility in these ugly matters?

Advocates for abuse victims were in Dallas recently protesting the continued ministry of Lynn C. Bauman, a former Dallas Episcopal priest convicted of molesting an 8-year-old Texas boy a decade ago. Dallas Bishop James Stanton defrocked him, but today, church officials in Minnesota allow the registered sex offender to lead spiritual retreats there.

The Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano learned May 16 that one of its ministers, Joe Barron, had been arrested in a police sting operation. The pastor allegedly solicited sex from an officer posing online as a 13-year-old girl. Given Prestonwood's prominence in North Texas, the arrest was top news.

Two days later, chief Pastor Jack Graham addressed the scandal from the pulpit. Did he defend the disgraced minister? Did he speak of all the good things Mr. Barron had done in his ministry? Did he call for forgiveness? Did he say that the pastor was going off for counseling and would be back in ministry soon, a "wounded healer"? Did he blame pop culture for Mr. Barron's fall, or lash out at the news media?

No, he did not.

In his address, Dr. Graham said the accused pastor had been asked to resign and had done so. He acknowledged pain but praised God for purifying the church. He exhorted his congregation to uphold Christian standards of morality. And he even thanked reporters for their coverage.

No excuses. No cheap grace. No breast-beating. Just clear, firm, sober action.

Because of this, it's probably safe to say that the Prestonwood congregation has a lot more faith in its clergy today than it might have otherwise.

In the end, the real scandal in cases like this comes not from the sins and crimes of sexual offenders. No church will ever be free of that. The truly damaging scandals arise when church leaders mishandle these crises by failing to treat them with the gravity they deserve. Many in church authority have failed their calling and their congregations under similar conditions, through defensiveness, dissimulation and deferring hard decisions.

Not Jack Graham.

Ernest Hemingway defined courage as "grace under pressure." By that standard, when put to the test by the Barron scandal, Prestonwood Baptist's chief pastor showed himself a brave man. That's leadership. **WATCH** Prestonwood Pastor Jack Graham address his congregation after the arrest of Joe Barron.

dallasnews.com/video