

STORY 1

February 9, 2013

Controversy over Newtown vigil exposes divisions among Lutherans

A decision by the leader of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to censure a pastor for participating in a prayer service for victims of the Sandy Hook school massacre has reopened old wounds for an often politically divided denomination.

The Rev. Matthew Harrison asked the pastor of a Newtown, Conn., church, the Rev. Rob Morris, to apologize for participating in a public interfaith vigil with President Barack Obama two days after a gunman killed 20 children and six adults at the town's elementary school.

In a letter posted on the synod's website, Harrison said Morris's participation in the service "violated the limits set by Scripture regarding joint worship."

Harrison declined a request for comment but explained in his letter that he believed the vigil in the auditorium of Newtown High School to be a worship service because it included "prayers and religious readings" by clergy, some of whom were dressed in ecclesiastical vestments.

The constitution of the 2.4 million-member denomination, based in Kirkwood, prohibits members from taking part in worship services that blend the beliefs and practices of Lutherans with those of other faiths and Christian denominations.

In 2001, a similar moment threatened the administration of Harrison's predecessor, the Rev. Gerald Kieschnick, after he allowed a pastor, the Rev. David Benke, to take part in an interfaith prayer vigil at Yankee Stadium in the weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Conservative elements in the church called for the removal of Kieschnick, and Benke was eventually suspended in June 2002. Benke was later reinstated, and the episode dogged Kieschnick's presidency.

MIXING FAITHS

In his email newsletter, Kieschnick weighed in on the Newtown service this week, writing that "the overwhelming majority of people both in and beyond the LCMS who hear the request for apology and/or removal shake their heads in disgust and dismay."

In 2004, the synod — under Kieschnick — issued guidelines for participating in public events, including the acknowledgment of "once-in-a-lifetime" situations which "can be evaluated only on a case-by-case basis."

The prayer vigil in December was organized by the Newtown Interfaith Clergy Association, and it included clergy from Christian denominations — Methodist, Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, evangelical — and Baha’i, Jewish and Muslim participants.

In Morris’ letter of apology, also published on the synod’s website, the pastor said he had “spent hours” teaching members of his own congregation the differences between Lutheranism and other Christians faiths, and between Lutheranism and “false religions such as Islam or B’Hai.”

He wrote that he had requested that a disclaimer be read at the outset of the service stating that “participation did not mean endorsement of the other religions represented,” and during his part of the vigil — a final blessing — he read from the book of Revelation.

Then, blessing the crowd with a sign of the cross, Morris prayed a benediction: “And now may the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.”

The LCMS constitution states that members must denounce “unionism” — mingling of Lutheran and other Christian theology or practice — and “syncretism,” the mingling of Christian and non-Christian theology or practice.

“I did not believe my participation to be an act of joint worship, but one of mercy and care to a community shocked and grieving an unspeakably horrific event,” he explained in his letter. “However, I recognize others in our church consider it to constitute joint worship and I understand why. I apologize where I have caused offense by pushing Christian freedom too far.”

Morris did not respond to an interview request.

STEADFAST CRITICS

The controversy over the Newtown vigil had flared on the Internet long before this week, as news spread of Morris’ apology.

As word of the pastor’s inclusion in the vigil leaked out just before the service, conservative voices within the synod began criticizing him online for planning to participate.

Perhaps the harshest critics were those affiliated with The Brothers of John the Steadfast, a group who identify themselves as confessional Lutherans — church members who stress strict adherence to the Book of Concord, the 16th-century work that defined the central doctrines of Lutheranism.

Confessional Lutherans were also critical of Kieschnick for allowing Lutheran participation in the Sept. 11 event, and the Brothers of John the Steadfast are credited with helping Harrison defeat Kieschnick for the synod presidency three years ago.

Steadfast published the list of clergy participants, including Morris, on its website, just before the Newtown service. That triggered a litany of comments on the site — some from the organization’s leaders — mostly critical of Morris.

Morris defended himself on the Steadfast website, citing the disclaimer “that no clergy member present was endorsing the religions of others, or recanting any portion of their own beliefs, but only offering their love, care, and prayer for their families and communities.”

But the Rev. Timothy Rossow, a pastor from Naperville, Ill., and Steadfast’s leader, compared the disclaimer to a man whose wife had caught him with a prostitute and who offered her an excuse that “it was OK because before we had sex we each claimed that this had no bearing on any other physical relation that we have, right or wrong, with any other person.”

Another pastor said that by participating in the service Morris had sinned. “There is no other way to say it,” he wrote.

One commenter said Morris’s participation in the service “does more harm to the souls of the survivors than any gunman could ever do.”

“Does anyone else agree that Pastor Morris’ action is more abominable than those committed by the gunman?” the commenter asked.

“Yes I do,” Rossow answered in a post that followed. “The gunman killed the body which lasts for 70 or 80 years. ... False teaching and practice kills the soul which lives for eternity in heaven or hell.”

Rossow, who did not respond to a request for an interview, has since removed the original post and all its comments from steadfastlutherans.org “so that we can let this matter unfold naturally without a lot of public hoopla,” he wrote.

In his letter, Harrison tried to quell the anger of fellow conservatives, asking anyone “contemplating action against Pastor Morris in the Synod’s reconciliation system that you do not do so. He has apologized.”

ELECTION TIES

Harrison’s handling of the Newtown service — what Rossow called a “come to Jesus moment” for the president — is almost certain to be a factor as he seeks re-election in July when LCMS delegates gather in St. Louis for their triennial convention.

Many conservatives believe Harrison took a stand for Lutheran orthodoxy. “In Matthew Harrison God has richly blessed our Church with a truly confessional theologian,” wrote one pastor on the Steadfast site.

But some pastors and academics — most of whom did not want to speak publicly — reacted angrily to Harrison’s letter.

“I would hope that this latest action by Harrison would be sufficient to lead LCMS electors to remove him from the office of president and to replace him with someone who is wiser and more evangelical,” said the Rev. Matthew Becker, interim pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Michigan City, Ind.

The Rev. Scott Seidler, pastor of Concordia Lutheran Church in Kirkwood, sent a message to his congregation saying that “with thousands of other pastors and church leaders from across our denomination, I find President Harrison’s actions to be both outside the bounds of his denominational authority and inconsistent with the example of Jesus Christ himself.”

In an email to the Post-Dispatch, Seidler said that Lutherans “will not soon forget the heavy-handed reproof of a young pastor who interceded for the little children. It is quite possible Matt Harrison is a one-term president.”

STORY 2

May 20, 2013

Changes to psychiatric manual ignite debate over grief, mental illness and faith

Each year 90,000 parents in the U.S. confront the profound suffering that follows the death of a child or adolescent.

Some of those rely on faith to help them through their grief. Others look to psychiatrists, who offer therapy or prescribe antidepressants to help ease their patients’ pain.

On Saturday, in a move that could add to the tension between religion and science, the American Psychiatric Association changed a controversial diagnosis regarding how grief relates to mental health.

The change “will affect every single person in the country, because at some point we’re all going to be bereaved,” said Joanne Cacciatore, founder of the Center for Loss and Trauma in Phoenix and a professor of social work at Arizona State University.

At issue are questions as fundamental as how long we grieve, what clinical label we assign to sadness, and when grief transforms into mental illness.

The modification also rekindles long-standing debates about whether spirituality or medicine offers the best pathway out of bereavement.

The debate comes down to a small edit to a guidebook that is considered psychiatry's diagnostic bible. It is one of many in the latest revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

After 14 years of work, the fifth edition of the book — called DSM-5 — was unveiled in San Francisco over the weekend at the annual meeting of the 36,000-member American Psychiatric Association.

Changes in each revision are important because most insurance companies require a DSM diagnosis before they reimburse doctors. The manual is also seen as the definitive psychiatric reference by other professions such as law, government and journalism.

Psychiatry historically has refrained from calling normal grief a mental disorder. Since 1994, when the last DSM was published, the guideline has been that when symptoms — sadness, distress, insomnia, trouble concentrating, lack of appetite — begin within two months of a loved one's death, but do not persist beyond those two months, psychiatrists should not diagnose "major depressive disorder." In earlier decades, psychiatrists waited a year before such a diagnosis.

The revision narrows that window to two weeks. So a person who has five of nine symptoms that define depression — regardless of the reason behind those symptoms — could be diagnosed as mentally ill.

That change could give psychiatrists earlier access to grieving patients, critics say, heightening a perception that medical responses to grief are encroaching on turf traditionally held by faith.

"It's in the realm of the spiritual that we learn to accept the unanswerable questions," Cacciatore said. "People can get help without being labeled mentally ill. That's what churches are for, that's what community is for, that's what spiritual leaders are for."

The shrinking window for grief has stoked what psychotherapist Gary Greenberg describes as an insurgency against the DSM, fueled, in part, by accusations that the changes would help funnel money to manufacturers of psychotropic drugs.

But supporters of the revision to the DSM say it has been misunderstood. Narrowing the grief window, they say, is about improving psychiatry's response to major depression. And the change does not interfere with the role of faith-based supports.

"There is nothing in the recognition of major depression that precludes the patient's receiving love and comfort from friends, family and clergy," Ronald Pies, a professor of psychiatry at SUNY Upstate Medical University, said in an email.

MISSING THE SIGNS

Normal bereavement and major depression share many of the same symptoms.

And because of those similarities, psychiatrists have historically carved out what is known as a “bereavement exclusion.” Its purpose was to reduce the likelihood that normal grief would be diagnosed as clinical depression.

But critics of that thinking say the greater danger is missing the signs of mental illness simply because a person is experiencing grief.

Such grief, they say, may even trigger major depressive disorder bringing more symptoms — a preoccupation with worthlessness, or thoughts of suicide.

Removing the exclusion, Pies and others argue, will allow psychiatrists to cast a wider net by more quickly diagnosing mental illness and offering treatment.

But critics have charged the APA with “medicalizing grief” by bypassing traditional methods of healing that come from friends, family or theology.

Greenberg, author of “Book of Woe: The DSM and the Unmaking of Psychiatry,” said psychiatry “never figured out how to distinguish mental illness from normal suffering.”

“We want to identify disorders and then eradicate them as if they were smallpox,” he said. “The idea is that the nature of suffering is to be eliminated, rather than valued, used and incorporated into a person’s life.”

LABELS AND DRUGS

Writing in the *New England Journal of Medicine* last May, Richard Friedman, a professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College, said the change would “erroneously label healthy people with a psychiatric diagnosis.”

Cacciatore said such labels have lasting effects.

“Once you say someone has a mental illness and bill their insurance company, that’s on their record,” she said. “They could be denied a job, lose custody of children or be denied insurance.”

Last May, in a concession to such arguments, the APA panel that worked on the issue said that a footnote would be added in the new DSM, a reminder that sadness and other mild depressive symptoms are not necessarily indicators of major depression.

But that hasn’t silenced broader concerns over labels and medication.

In December, Allen Frances, a professor emeritus of psychiatry at Duke University and a high-profile critic of DSM-5, wrote in *Psychology Today* that the APA will be “substituting pills and superficial medical rituals for the deep consolations of family, friends, religion and the resiliency that comes with time and the acceptance of the limitations of life.”

That concern was shared by Friedman, who wrote that the change would “no doubt be a boon to the pharmaceutical industry, because it will encourage unnecessary treatment with antidepressants and antipsychotics.”

The APA asked those revising the DSM to provide financial disclosures of any grant money, consultation fees and stock ownership that could be perceived as a conflict of interest.

In an analysis of the disclosures, Lisa Cosgrove, a professor of counseling and school psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, found that of those who served on the DSM-5 panel that eliminated the bereavement exclusion, 67 percent had ties to pharmaceutical companies that make the drugs used to treat mood disorders.

The APA did not respond to a request for an interview.

GOING THROUGH THE DARK

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2.5 million Americans die each year, leaving tens of millions of Americans grieving. For millennia before Sigmund Freud’s birth, it was religion that helped many through the difficult realization that they’d never again see someone they were close to.

Lucy Bregman, a professor of religion at Temple University, refers to the job of a spiritual leader comforting someone who’s experienced loss as “meaning-making.”

“Making some kind of meaningful framework within which personal and historical tragedies make sense is not always successful,” Bregman said, “but it is one of the functions of religion.”

Cacciatore said those suffering from traumatic grief heal more quickly through human contact, often with a nod to the divine. Psychiatrists, she said, “can’t do someone’s grieving for them.”

“Nothing can comfort someone about the great mysteries of life like a relationship with another human being — sitting with someone, crying with someone,” she said. “We have to let people go through the dark night of the soul.”

STORY 3

September 24, 2013

Eden professor is hired to train Navy’s clergy to deal with victims of assault

Kristen Leslie began her 2003 book, "When Violence Is No Stranger," with a verse from Psalms, a nod to her training as a theologian.

"It is not enemies who taunt me - I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me - I could hide from them. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend..."

The book's subject was acquaintance rape, and it got the attention of a chaplain at the Air Force Academy. The school was then reeling from a Pentagon report indicating that 7 percent of its cadets reported being the victims of rape or attempted rape. Nearly 90 percent of the perpetrators were their own classmates.

Leslie, now a professor of pastoral theology and care at Eden Theological Seminary in Webster Groves, was invited to Colorado to consult with academy leaders on how to train Air Force chaplains to deal with sexualized violence on campus.

A decade later, the U.S. Navy has come knocking.

This month, the Navy announced that it had contracted with Leslie and another expert to conduct training sessions next year with its chaplains.

The Navy hopes chaplains can help address a crisis in underreporting of sexual abuse by military personnel.

"Chaplains have been trained so far in the legal issues surrounding sexual assault, but that's not their primary focus," Leslie said.

In June, the Joint Chiefs of Staff testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services on proposals to combat sexual assault in the military, and last month, the Pentagon introduced regulations that it says will help prevent sexual assault and better prosecute the crime when it happens.

A little more than a week later, a high-profile hearing began looking into allegations that three Naval Academy football players sexually assaulted a female midshipman last year.

In its 2012 report on sexual assault in the military, the U.S. Department of Defense cited 26,000 cases of unwanted sexual contact, up from 19,000 in 2010. The same report said only 3,000 service members who were victims of sexual assault reported the incident to military authorities.

'NOT ACCEPTABLE'

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said the results of the report suggest behavior that "is just not acceptable."

"We will get control of this," he said.

Each year, Navy chaplains receive professional development training around a specific issue. Navy chaplain Lt. Cmdr. David Thames, deputy executive assistant to the chief of Navy chaplains, helped coordinate next year's focus on sexual assault.

In an email, Thames said that while chaplains already receive training in sexual assault reporting procedures, Leslie's training will represent "the first time the chaplain corps has focused on specialized pastoral care training for chaplains caring for sexual assault victims."

Leslie will conduct the training with Marie Fortune, founder of the FaithTrust Institute in Seattle. They will travel to eight naval locations in the United States and to locations in Naples, Italy, and Okinawa, Japan, to take part in the three-day professional development course.

A major focus of Leslie's training will be around the subject of confidentiality. Reasons military members don't report sexual assault range from fear of reprisals to fear of creating more work for their colleagues.

FEAR OF REPRISAL

A 2011 Air Force survey found that nearly 50 percent of women who were raped didn't want their superiors to know. Nearly 50 percent also said they didn't report the assault because they didn't want to cause trouble in their unit.

Chaplains are considered outside the chain of command, and are bound by confidentiality. Yet, because they are officers, young, inexperienced service members often see chaplains simply as superiors.

The Navy points out that confidentiality - which it calls a "sacred trust" - has been standard practice for its chaplain corps since 1775. But to reinforce the practice, it made chaplain confidentiality official policy in 2008.

"Chaplains cannot be compelled by the command, medical professionals or others to disclose what a service member or family member shares in confidence," a Navy fact sheet tells its sailors. "What you say to a chaplain in confidence stays between you and the chaplain, unless you decide differently. You hold the key."

And yet according to a recent poll on the Navy Personnel Command's website, 63 percent of Navy personnel did not believe that what they tell a chaplain is considered confidential, and 65 percent said they thought chaplains were required to report certain matters to the command.

Two members of the Armed Services Committee - Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y. - have been pushing legislation to reform the legal aspects of prosecuting military sexual assault.

McCaskill said while her focus has been justice for victims, "chaplain training is essential."

"The fact that the Navy is doing this is a positive sign that the military is taking this seriously," she said.

McCaskill said it helps that chaplains are considered outside the chain of command.

"It's important that a victim feels he or she can go where privacy can be protected," she said, adding that it's also "essential that these chaplains have good information about how to handle" sexual assault survivor support.

'GOOD MOVE'

More pastoral care offered by chaplains could boost reporting, McCaskill said, which would help get perpetrators "drummed out of the military and put in prison."

The Rev. Cynthia Ramirez Lindenmeyer, a former Army chaplain who is now a member of the Pentagon's Defense Advisory Committee on Women and the Services, said while chaplains represent part of the solution to the problem, a lot of work remains to be done.

"Most military chaplains are coming into the military from seminaries that don't do much training in that area," Lindenmeyer said. "So this kind of pastoral training the Navy is starting is a good move."

Military chaplains are endorsed by hundreds of faith traditions, many of which have conflicting views on what Lindenmeyer - a United Church of Christ pastor - calls "the rape-myth culture."

"Chaplains need to learn more about the culture that is predominant in fundamentalist Christian churches that blames a woman for drinking when she was attacked, or dressed provocatively or out with 10 guys," she said. "When some chaplains blame the woman, that hurts the victim even more."

Leslie, an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church, said a Navy chaplain who is a Roman Catholic priest recently told her he thought of his job as youth ministry.

"These are young men and women, and sometimes because of the uniform, we forget that," Leslie said. "Those who report sexual assault are taking a risk in exposing themselves. By supporting both the survivors and the command in doing good and correct things, chaplains can help to allow the mission to be accomplished."