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# **NARCISSISTIC PASTORS AND THE MAKING OF NARCISSISTIC CHURCHES**

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## **Abstract**

*Can churches take on the pathological behaviors associated with narcissism through the influence of a narcissistic pastor? While there is a large body of literature on narcissistic individuals, and a smaller body of research into narcissistic organizations, there is little research on the prevalence of toxic narcissism in clergy and little to none on narcissistic churches. This paper is written from the perspective of currently available research and the author's experience in working with churches suffering from severe internal conflicts in which both the pastor and church evidenced toxic levels of narcissism. The intent is to increase awareness, open a dialogue and spur research into the phenomenon of narcissistic clergy and how they influence their churches.*

## **The Narcissist Pastor and the Makings of the Narcissist Church**

There are claims that our culture has become increasingly narcissistic. According to Zondag and van Uden (2014), one of the earlier measurements of societal narcissism came in a 1950 study where 50% of teenagers considered themselves to be important; that figure by

1980 had risen to 80%. What might it be today, some 40 years later? The proliferation of camera phones and social media has led to what might be called a narcissistic selfie epidemic (Goldberg, 2017) since narcissistic people are taking more selfies than less narcissistic people (Scion, 2019). Magazines with titles such as *Me* and *Us* proliferate.

Pastors emerge from the entire spectrum of economic and cultural backgrounds as those in any other profession and may have socially undesirable personality traits that are found in the broader population, a manifestation of the sinful condition of humans. What happens when extreme levels of narcissism and religiosity are found in an individual?

Foundational to this paper is an understanding of narcissism in general. Narcissism has been associated with terms such as selfish, egotistical, self-centered, self-absorbed, superiority complex, and so on. Narcissistic tendencies vary in strength but tend to become more difficult to deal with as they increase in intensity.

Every human being has narcissistic tendencies that each person expresses differently. At the lowest end of the spectrum are simple human needs for acceptance, recognition, relationships, and community. People with extremely high narcissism might be diagnosed by licensed mental health providers as having Narcissistic Personality Disorder, (NPD) a psychological disorder; however, extreme levels of narcissism may exist in an individual regardless of a formal diagnosis.

This paper will focus on the behaviors of people with very high levels of narcissism, commonly termed narcissists. Narcissism that is outwardly expressed in interpersonal contexts may be called toxic or malignant narcissism because of the negative and destructive behaviors that accompany it.

Emotions drive behaviors. In general terms, the toxic narcissist experiences fewer key human emotions: empathy, compassion, and love. In their place are envy, fear, and even rage. While the term narcissist is generally thought to mean an overabundance of self-love, the near opposite may be more accurate: they fear they may be perceived as broken or worthless, a fear which may fuel shame. To hide this fear and fulfill a strong need for admiration, they create grandiose fantasies about their great achievements, many of which may be greatly exaggerated or exist only in their imagination. This

grandiosity stems from the belief that they are superior to most others and should be recognized as such, often without the achievements that such recognition would require. They see themselves as special, entitled, and unique, and tend to believe they can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people. Exercising power and control over their environment and everyone around them is a coping mechanism for dealing with their fears of exposure.

Lacking empathy, they tend to refuse to forgive even the slightest offense, real or imagined. The lack of empathy also allows them to manipulate and exploit others for their own purposes and to discard them when no longer useful. They are often envious of others or believe that others are envious of them (Adapted from DSM5, Diagnostic Criteria 301.81).

These characteristics are not fully descriptive, nor are they simply superficial, external behaviors; they describe the toxic narcissist at the very core of his being: nonempathic, arrogant, entitled, power-centric, exploitative, dishonest, envious, paranoid, and angry. From the perspective of a mental health professional, such behaviors are pathological and become almost untreatable because “the narcissist does not believe there is a problem, let alone that he or she is the problem” (Narcissistic Personality Disorder Statistics). Underneath it all, the narcissist fears that he may be perceived as weak, unworthy, ugly, and broken beyond repair. The paradox is that his ego is so brittle that he cannot even contemplate the idea that there might be something wrong with him; doing so may be the equivalent of death and is to be avoided at all costs (Puls 2020).

Various types of narcissists exist. The most visible are the “grandiose” or overt narcissists. They tend to be extraverted, grandiose, aggressive, entitled, manipulative, and may “place themselves above the bounds of social conventions” (Kealy & Rasmussen 2010, p. 356). While there may be a generalized tendency to see all narcissists as being the same, they are not. The second group is termed covert or vulnerable narcissists. These people tend to be introverted, self-effacing, shame-based, and extremely sensitive to any form of criticism. Both types crave recognition and honor but express their needs differently (Kealy & Rasmussen 2010, p. 359). These

differences will be explored in more detail later.

Narcissism is rarely studied in the clergy. Some research focuses on levels of “healthy” or functional narcissism. Zondag and colleagues concluded that more than 80% of the pastors they studied in Poland and the Netherlands scored high to very high in what they termed benign or non-pathological narcissism (Zondag et al., 2009), a narcissism that does no harm. According to that study, these pastors can direct their narcissistic needs in positive directions. The Barna research organization confirmed that narcissism runs high in pastors through self-image questions, concluding that 90% of American pastors scored themselves as excellent to above average preachers and teachers (Barna Group, 2000). As in the Zondag (2009) study, most of these men and women channel their narcissistic needs in positive ways and do little to no harm and even much good.

The focus of this paper is on the two basic types of toxic narcissists, overt narcissists (who tend to be extroverted) and the covert narcissists (who tend to be introverted). The overt (extraverted) narcissists tend to be high energy, charming, intelligent, and full of ideas, but also full of themselves. The covert (introverted) narcissists, also known as vulnerable narcissists, proclaim their merits, but at a much lower volume. Covert narcissists are noted for emotional fragility, which “translates into a need for a target onto which to shift blame, because of their entrenched inability to take responsibility” (Durvasula, 2019, para. 8). As a nondenominational church consultant, I have interacted with many of both types of narcissistic pastors. However, they all saw themselves as victims of ungrateful church members who did not appreciate how blessed they were to have them leading their congregations. Knowing I was there because of problems in their churches, those who show overt narcissistic tendencies have tended to be somewhat hostile towards me. The covert narcissists have tended to be more welcoming and friendly, self-effacing but also clearly pleased when complimented. Since I am responsible for analyzing ongoing problems in their churches, covert narcissists have complained with resignation that a generalized rejection was their cross to carry as pastors. Both types accuse their staffs of incompetence and sabotage. They claim that staffers, including associate pastors, need constant supervision and correction. Their congregations had welcomed them warmly but now have been actively undermining

them. The pastors had considered leaving but decided to stay; Jesus suffered, and so must they. One proclaimed that Jesus was only crucified once, but this was his third personal crucifixion.

One of the more difficult realities to accept is that narcissists may intentionally create chaos around them. However, a chaotic work environment was a common staff complaint. According to Dodson (2018), chaos is a hallmark of the narcissist at work, within a family, and in romantic relationships. Whether intentional or not, creating chaos and confusion around them and watching as others struggle to understand and regain some manner of control gives them a sense of superiority and control.

Research on narcissism and religiosity is limited but revealing. Narcissism correlates positively with external but passive religious coping (Cooper & Pullig, 2006) in which the individual and God both take passive rather than active roles in dealing with troubles (Zondag & van Uden, 2010). The narcissist waits for God to intervene, but God is nowhere to be found and so the narcissist is on his own. Further, narcissism negatively correlates with internalized or intrinsic religiosity (Watson et al., 1984), a dimension of religiosity which measures how much a person values the beliefs of that religion. People high in intrinsic religiosity use their beliefs as a guide to live by. Their entire approach to life is framed by their religious beliefs. (Gellman & Turner, 2013).

Feelings of entitlement, a characteristic of both overt and covert narcissists, are positively correlated to expressions of anger towards God (Grubbs & Exline, 2014) and negatively related to willingness to forgive others (Exline et al., 2004), an essential aspect of following Christ (Matt. 6:15). Several studies indicate that narcissists never forgive because they become almost addicted to ruminations of revenge. Siassi (2007) writes, “Nursing a grudge is an attachment to painful affect. . . The attachment is so deep that it informs the subject’s identity; the painful affect must be constantly renewed” (1430).

This means that the narcissistic pastor may lead a double life. Pastoral ministry requires pastors to provide empathy, compassion, care, understanding, and forgiveness, all of which the narcissistic pastor does not generally experience but must learn to effectively

mimic. At home, out of the public eye, they may be domineering, emotionally abusive, deceitful, and even sexually violent. This naturally creates tensions that might be exposed.

Details of some of my other experiences with narcissistic pastors can be found elsewhere (Puls, 2020), but a basic understanding of pastoral narcissism is necessary for understanding how narcissism can affect a church. First, narcissistic pastors can be highly charismatic, which often enables them to be hired. Charisma often characterizes their public persona, but the narcissistic pastors' staff, board, and family may experience a side that the congregation rarely sees, a person who is arrogant, entitled, controlling, vindictive, manipulative, paranoid, dishonest, unethical, boastful, domineering, self-pitying, and rageful. It is the church staff and his family who are the most common victims. Since the narcissist will rarely accept blame for things gone awry, they can be sadistic when a scapegoat is needed to blame whether at home or in the church (Soleil, 2018).

Narcissists require constant external admiration to be reassured of their self-esteem. The position of pastor would be quite attractive to those who crave such admiration, as it is central to the drama of worship and religious exercise. It offers continuous gratification through telling people how to live with holy writ for a guide, being an integral part of the joys and tragedies of life, being told people's deepest fears and darkest secrets, being sought out for advice and counseling, and being invited to banquets and intimate dinners as the honored guest. Such glory and power might seem quite attractive to a narcissist. Recognition by others is the air they breathe, their "narcissistic supply;" when they do not receive this, they perceive the experience as a personal rejection (*a narcissistic injury*), which may result in an irrational reaction (Bezuidenhout & Wharren, 2013).

Clergy are expected to act compassionately, keep secrets in confidence, listen deeply to confessions of sin, be honest and even transparent – all of which are contrary to the nature of the narcissist. These norms tend to crumble under the stresses of paranoia and feeling unappreciated. Their biggest secret may be that they see God as a rival to be diminished in favor of their own superior qualities (Capps, 2009). However, the culture of politeness found in most churches inhibits truthful conversation (Isaacs, 1999) and requires

parishioners to regularly compliment the pastor whether the compliment is earned or not (Godkin & Allcorn, 2011).

Pastors are expected to be humble and spiritually mature so that others might seek them out for guidance. Humility and religiousness are dimensions of the self and are tightly connected, perhaps inseparable. Perhaps the simplest definition of humility is placing God and others above oneself in importance, loyalty, and action. Humility, however, also requires honesty in sharing doubts and questions of faith. The vulnerable narcissist might hint at this, but it is always accompanied by a story of overcoming. The overt narcissist is unlikely to express anything that might indicate vulnerability.

It can safely be concluded that true narcissists know little to nothing about humility, let alone practice it. Interestingly, the narcissists' extrinsic religiosity (religious behavior for the rewards it brings) reflect a religion "they believe that they believe," but it remains forever external and unattainable (Lowicki & Zajenkowski, 2017). If that is the case, and if deep spirituality cannot exist without humility, then whatever spirituality the narcissist pastor exhibits may have little meaning (Rowatt et al., 2014).

Behind the narcissistic façade of care and compassion is a vacuum where the self should be. Kealy and Rasmussen (2012) state there is no real self underneath what they term the "psychological exoskeleton of narcissism." I argue that this is both too harsh and an overstatement. There may still be a deeply wounded human being inside coping in the only way it knows how.

### **The Making of the Narcissist Church**

Narcissists strive for dominance and absolute control of their environment (Johnson et al., 2019). I posit that the narcissist pastor will begin remaking the church into his own image as soon as he arrives.

According to Godkin and Allcorn (2011), "Dysfunctional individual narcissistic leader behaviors are translated into organizational or group beliefs and behaviors through contagion" (p. 62). By contagion they mean the transmission of a dangerous condition through close contact. The implication is that the narcissism of the pastor is contagious and may be transmitted to the congregation through routine close contact.



To understand how this works one must first consider what makes a church vulnerable to narcissistic seduction.

### **Raising One's Self-Esteem**

Christian tradition unequivocally affirms that humility is a virtue. The Jewish scriptures presented humility as a virtue, but Christian scripture and subsequent Christian thought put humility at the center of the moral life of the Christian. There exists a paradox, however. As the Church gained power and wealth, it succumbed to the temptation to glorify itself through pageantry and the power of its wealth. Though Protestantism initially rejected the external pageantry of the Roman church, it can be argued that it has now yielded to the temptation of self-glorification. One need only examine the showpiece auditoria costing millions of dollars that are the new icons of Christian church success. The tension between humility and American notions of success may be irreconcilable.

People tend to find their self-esteem enhanced by the organizations to which they belong. One study examined "...the proposition that group memberships are an important social resource that enhances self-esteem. Specifically, we examined the hypothesis that identification with multiple important social groups provides a basis from which to draw psychological resources to boost personal self-esteem" (Jetten et al., 2015, p. 22). The hypothesis was supported. However, humble surroundings are not particularly attractive to those immersed in the North American visions of success, wealth, and power. Most congregants are not wealthy and so attaching themselves to churches which display wealth and power may be attractive. Most people want the most positive identity they can have, and may find it in a church, particularly when the church presents itself in grandiose terms. In my experience as a church consultant, Protestant churches rarely advertise themselves as humble places for humble people, but it seems that many churches want to be something greater than they are. While it is good to strive towards challenging goals, a small Methodist church in rural Nebraska is unlikely to change the world even though this may be claimed as its goal.

## How Churches Become Narcissistic

Pastors in many churches come and go. Churches between pastors often experience a sense of drifting without direction (Scharmer, 2009) and are most vulnerable when seeking a new pastor, a period of organizational change that William Bridges terms “the Neutral Zone,” a time of ambiguity and uncertainty. The leader is gone; there is no new leader. The longer a church remains in this state of uncertainty, the more agitated their members become (Bridges, 1998). They may begin to demand quick action, which is an invitation to cut corners in recruiting a new pastor. This leaves the pastor-seeking church open to what I term the Charisma Trap.

### The Charisma Trap

Humility is one of the hallmarks of the Christian calling, but as mentioned, success brings a paradox. Our culture’s definition of success may be incompatible with humility: greatness, riches, power, beauty, and so on. Mike Play of Biola University writes about his pastoral calling, “All of us who call ourselves pastors are in constant danger of abandoning our vocation to be faithful servants of Jesus and His church in order to pursue our own brilliance” (2017, para. 11). Churches between pastors want someone who can lead them into a brighter future, which is exactly what the narcissist may promise them. They want someone charismatic, even spellbinding, as their pastor. Overt narcissists are often noted for their charisma. Their fear of negative evaluation may fuel the drive to self-aggrandize (Ronningstam & Sommers, 2013). A charismatic narcissist may make claims of forthcoming unlimited success. Wanting to believe and be part of something greater than themselves, followers choose to accept what the leader claims, even if it clashes with their past experiences, reason, or the advice of others. The leader’s charisma entrances the church members to prioritize his version of truth, even if perceived as strange (Dawson, 2006).

Two fundamental concepts associated with church growth are vision and mission. The vision can be cast in prophetic terms for long-term planning while the mission is generally more clearly stated in measurable terms. Habakkuk 2:1-2 speaks to vision: “I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he

will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint. Then the LORD replied: “Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it” (NIV). Proverbs 29:18 states, “Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained” (NASB).

Pastoral candidates must express a vision for their ministry and the church they seek to shepherd. While honest, humble pastors may want to create a vision of hope, the narcissist pastor will be more grandiose, offering a compelling “vision” of how the church, under his leadership, will reach new heights of visibility, fame, and ministry. This visionary boldness is one reason why narcissists are perceived as leaders (Braun, 2017). In my estimation, this energetic vision casting is also a carefully executed plan of seduction.

The period of pastoral search is a period of vulnerability for the church. The honest resumé of a humble candidate is rarely as exciting as the one presented by a narcissistic candidate. The narcissist’s resumé is almost always full of impressive entries. Some may be fabrications, including academic degrees never earned, prestigious positions never held, awards never received, and so on. The assumption is that no one will check. There are ways of detecting narcissism in their written application and cover letter (Craig & Amernic, 2011), but few people are aware of them. In my experience, pastoral search teams often have little or no training in the art of ferreting out accurate information on a candidate – they may stop with the listed references rather than digging two or three layers deeper. They also may tend to ask only polite questions of the candidate and references, rather than difficult ones. A small church may not have the resources necessary to conduct a thorough investigation.

A narcissistic candidate may be counting on the search team to not check each claim. For a more humble applicant, it is a matter of deciding which qualities to emphasize and how to present weaknesses in the best light possible. The vulnerable or covert narcissist may also acknowledge his weaknesses, though he may present them as strengths in showing his determination to serve God despite the obstacles. The overt narcissist, however, often believes he has no defects; therefore, there is nothing to minimize (Atlas & Them, 2008). They also tend to have little sense of subtlety “. . .and tend to use powerful, hyperbolic language” (Craig & Amernic, 2011, p. 569). In one large church I

worked with, there were more than 200 applications for the Senior Pastor position. Several cover letters included something like, “I know without a doubt that God has called me to Rivers Edge Church. I have prayed about it and have waited upon the Lord, and He has told me that this is where I am meant to be. Together we will take the church to a higher level. I can’t wait to get started!” Three or four claimed to have “placed a fleece before the Lord” à la Gideon, and the fleece was dry despite the rain. It is unlikely that God called several to the same position, but it was a way of identifying potential narcissists because of their apparent sense of entitlement and grandiosity (Puls, 2020). In another instance I investigated, a candidate claimed he held a Ph.D. in psychology from a prestigious university and that he had been a lieutenant-colonel Air Force chaplain. The investigation discovered that the university had never heard of him and his Air Force records indicated he had never been an officer.

Wanting to believe and be part of something greater than themselves, followers choose to accept what the leader claims, even if it clashes with their intuition, logic, or the wisdom of others (Johnson et al., 2019). The church with a new charismatic overt narcissist pastor may grow quickly because it is easy for such a pastor to be seen more as a celebrity than a shepherd. However, the nutrients feeding the roots of the church have changed. Chuck DeGroat (2020) argues that the changes tend to be introduced so gradually that they may be unnoticed as the church slowly takes on more and more narcissistic characteristics. The congregants may be quite content with the changes if the church is growing once again (McNeal, 2003).

Narcissist CEOs (including senior pastors) often lead their organizations into decline (Rijsenbilt & Commandeur, 2013). They run out of fresh ideas, they are caught in too many lies, too many people have left from psychological abuse, the organization may be sued for a hostile work environment, and the staff turnover rate is high. There is also a danger of pastoral embezzlement to fill in the difference between his actual compensation and the compensation to which he feels he is entitled; he may pad personal expense reimbursement requests or use the church credit card for personal purchases (Rijsenbilt & Commandeur, 2013). For people to commit fraud, they need to have the opportunity, the motivation, a rationalization, and the belief that they have the power to deceive (Harrison et al., 2018). A

small church pastor with a sense of entitlement may have exactly what is needed. Other times the fraud may be more subtle or sophisticated. For example, the church may buy thousands of copies of the pastor's books to increase the sales ranking and royalties (Kellogg, 2014).

Over time, the church begins to take on the characteristics valued and encouraged by the pastor. He may tell the congregation how unique their church is, how special they are, how others view the church as amazing, how he is inundated by other pastors wanting to know his secrets, and even how he is fending off agents trying to sign him to a book contract. These proclamations supposedly confirm the vision that God has given him. The church may then respond by granting the pastor more freedom to self-aggrandize, exert power—and victimize parishioners. If the pastor is charismatic enough and is able to sustain the excitement long enough, followers will place him on an ever-higher pedestal and increase their commitment to follow him.

The church with a covert narcissist as pastor is not as likely to take on these more obvious characteristics of narcissism simply because the signals from the pastor are not as strong. Even so, the church over time is likely to become more and more isolated from other churches and the belief in their own uniqueness may develop, creating a false sense of superiority.

### **Life Narratives and Identity**

We all have life narratives, or stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and identity emerges from that narrative (Hussink et al., 2016). Churches also have these narratives. An amalgamation of history, fact, wishful thinking, and even fantasy, the narratives are presented as the life story of the church. As the narrative becomes accepted, the parishioners begin to attach their identities to the church's identity (Johansen, 2017). Eventually, the church's new narrative woven by the narcissist pastor may become a story of humble beginnings, overcoming barriers, and spectacular success. The church's narrative is pliable history influencing the current internal discussions about itself, including the proclamation of its uniqueness. Congregants will believe it, proclaim it, and act on it even if it is largely a self-aggrandizing myth (Babińska & Bilewicz, 2018).

Becoming part of a church involves the emergence of a new personal identity shaped by the church's doctrinal statement, practices, and culture. Individual identities may be partially subsumed into the organizational identity of the church, which can be described as the set of beliefs shared between the leaders and those who attend concerning the central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics of the church, including practices, values, mission, and actions that differentiate it from other churches. This shared identity may provide a needed sense of belonging, making those who attend into stakeholders (Scott & Lane, 2000). The church becomes their home, and the pastor is the new authority figure. Personal and organizational identities give motivation to endure difficult times while difficult times tend to strengthen the identity and the relationships that created it (Babińska & Bilewicz, 2018). In this way the church sees itself as legitimate and important (Brown 1997).

The church narrative provides identity and legitimacy for congregants (Hassink et al., 2016). Over time, newcomers are accepted and become embedded within the narrative and internal life of the church. They become "legitimate" because they accept and share the beliefs of the church and other members. Once they are seen as legitimate members, trust is extended to them and they are viewed as successful (Hassink et al., 2016). As newer members become part of the church, the church becomes part of them and their identity (Dukerich et al., 2000). They are invited deeper and deeper into the church culture and may become increasingly isolated from the rest of the world.

The pastor is at the center of all this. In the narcissist church, the pastor places himself on an ever-elevating platform that takes him above the other members. It can become a type of idolatry in the form of "an idealized self-object." Jennifer Dyer (2012) writes in the *Journal of Religion and Health*,

...for many Evangelicals and other Christians, the idealized self-object takes the form of a pastor, speaker, or leader. An idealized self-object is a person for whom the patient has deep respect and wishes to emulate. The evangelical subculture has allowed for the emergence of many leaders, as celebrities, playing roles as artists, authors, pastors, and speakers. Some are even actors. The fans

among these celebrities treasure their words and message. The commercialization of Evangelicalism through publishing, recording, and parachurch organizations that create spaces for festivals, concerts, and conferences further aids in constructing celebrity for these evangelical leaders (p. 247).

## Control

The narcissist pastor feels compelled to be in complete control and knows that he controls the church if he controls the governing board. Over time he may replace the old leaders with hand-picked replacements who may be more loyal than competent. They become a layer in his shield against outside attacks. With his selected leaders in positions of power, healthier leaders may disengage or leave. The cycle becomes self-perpetuating as new leaders with stronger narcissistic tendencies emerge.

Church size makes a difference. Dunaetz, Jung, and Lambert (2018) in a preliminary study of 67 evangelical church member experiences found that the larger the church the more tolerant it becomes of a narcissist leader. They credit this to declining opportunities of member activism in the policies of the church as it grows, leaving smaller churches with more active members and less tolerance of narcissistic pastors.

Institutional memory is a check against the fabricated narratives of narcissistic organizations (Kleinberg, 2014). However, even as individual memories can be changed (Loftus, 1996), so too can institutional memories be changed via internal and external influences. The history narrative gives shape to current identities while these modified identities reshape interpretations of past traumas (Babińska & Bilewicz, 2018). In other words, the two play off each other in a circle of reciprocity that is perpetually in motion.

Overt narcissist pastors may demand complete and unquestioning obedience, leading the church to develop cult-like characteristics that influence beliefs and values “along a continuum of various states which include paranoia, obsessive compulsive, dramatic, depressive, schizoid, and narcissistic tendencies” (Hunter, 2013, p. 44). The narrative at the heart of their identity story may be used to strengthen the power of the pastor.

The covert or vulnerable narcissist pastor works hard to avoid conflict, criticism, competition, and even striving for achievement while submitting to circumstances; these unspoken norms are projected into the church (Godkin & Allcorn, 2011). This more passive type of church is generally smaller and may also lack sufficient built-in financial restraints and accountability, thus making allowance for abuse. Clear financial control systems can greatly inhibit behaviors that slow or stymie goal achievement and block the tendency of the narcissist pastor to reward himself outside of authorized channels (Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2016).

The narcissist pastor will declare transparency in all the church does but will create a tightly controlled internal communication system with clear lines of authority, both within a rigid hierarchical structure (Brauer, 2017). This discourages alternative opinions and inhibits internal cooperation; there are no clear departmental directives towards goals, all of which constrain communication and create barriers to sharing information and open communication (Brauer, 2017), creating a staff culture of isolated free agents shaping their ministries as they wish.

The pastor sets the example of ethicality—and the narcissist pastor is “ethically challenged.” As a result, ethical restraints become weakened. The church will believe it is ethical and the narcissist pastor will proclaim ethicality at every turn, but there is a problem: the narcissist is inherently, perhaps pathologically, unethical (Cooper et al., 2016). He simply does not believe that the rules apply to him. Image, however, is a moderating consideration. The narcissist is far more concerned with appearances than reality; thus, the appearance of an ethical organization feeds his narcissism (Godkin & Allcorn, 2011), which in turn increases the incentive to appear ethical while not necessarily being ethical. His rules tend to bend towards flexibility and exceptions that benefit him. Mostly, they go unnoticed by the congregation (Kleinberg, 2014). Overt narcissists tend to believe that the normal rules of conduct, personal boundaries, finances, and even morality do not apply to them and act accordingly, but in secret. When caught, they will deny any wrongdoing and mount multiple defenses pushing blame away. Multiple famous pastors have made headlines when caught with male and female prostitutes, possessing methamphetamines, stealing money from their churches, and one even



went to prison for bilking investors out of millions of dollars. Their belief that they are smarter than everyone else gives them the confidence that they will not be caught (Puls, 2020).

Churches are almost always legally constituted corporations and have hierarchical organizational structures. One would expect churches to be different from secular organizations, and most are. In applying organizational research to churches, narcissistic churches have in some ways lost their moral identities and as a result unwittingly find it difficult to behave ethically (Duchon and Drake 2009). They did not become unethical intentionally but because of their self-obsession, sense of entitlement, self-aggrandizement, denial, and rationalizations. While such churches may not have intentionally abandoned their ethics, the result of that gradual and unnoticed abandonment serves to justify anything they do. If narcissistic churches as organizations tend to parallel private corporations, adopting formal ethics standards and programs may not have much effect on behaviors, e.g., Enron.

The church, though having the appearance of success and outreach, is likely to become more isolated in the community. It is now transitioning to what Jerkiewicz and Giacalone (2014) term an “avoidant organization.” Godkin and Allcorn (2011) elaborate, arguing that the avoidant organization suffers having adopted the distorted world and organizational view held by its leaders. Shared dysfunctional beliefs prevent learning more productive behaviors while the unproductive behaviors continue. The result may be “a reality distorting outcome that filters reality and inhibits individual, group and organizational learning” (p. 65) with the result it refuses to acknowledge mistakes. It also tends to develop ethically dysfunctional traits, including deception, distrust, and paranoia. Some employees may become dysfunctionally dependent on the pastor while others begin operating as they wish. It is likely that these churches have no effective succession plan should the pastor suddenly become disabled. In the worst cases, there may be inequality, inhumanity, and dictatorial working conditions characterized by harsh, inflexible, and unyielding mindsets coupled with little to no respect towards staff. These characteristics tend to strengthen the longer the narcissist pastor is unchallenged in power. If institutional morals (core values, mission statements) are not reaffirmed regularly or are poorly communicated, and accountability is lacking, exploitation is likely (Kleinberg, 2014).

Even so, in his grandiosity and entitlement, it is likely the narcissist pastor will enthusiastically endorse these affirmations all the while believing they do not apply to him.

Brown (1997) argues in an extensive analysis of organizational narcissism that “collective entities, in the form of groups and organizations, literally have needs for self-esteem that are regulated narcissistically” (p. 303). As people become part of the church, the church becomes part of them in a reciprocal transfusion of culture, personality, and needs (Volkan & Fowler, 2009).

### **Crossing the Rubicon**

There are warning signs the church has crossed from relatively normal narcissism into what might be called Narcissistic Personality Organization (Volkan & Fowler, 2009). In confirmation, Laing and Dunn (2014) argue that organizations can institutionalize a sense of superior identity and legitimacy that encourages narcissistic behavior, particularly in its employees who will believe their organization to be extraordinary and unique. From this comes a belief that the organization is in some sense all-powerful and even omniscient with access to all relevant information – incongruent or contradictory information is summarily rejected. The delusion of superiority allows the organization to be dismissive of other organizations, people and information and treats them with contempt. These ideas may become so embedded in the organizational mindset that they manifest in groupthink.

These organizations (in this case churches) tend to rationalize and endow themselves with claims of righteousness and even some level of sentience as part of their uniqueness. “This anthropomorphism is a concern since it implies that an organization may indeed have the capacity to act and develop a form of personality” (Laing & Dunn, 2014, pp. 61–62; Scharmer, 2009).

### **Denial**

No church is perfect, yet church members tend to conceal or simply deny any disagreeable truths about the churches they belong to (Brown 1997, p. 654), confirming Ten Elshof’s (2009) contentions about how Christians are little different from others in having a penchant for self-

deception. We believe what we want to believe. If it is believed that the church is highly superior and unique, organizational miscues and mistakes must then be denied or blamed on other people or churches.

Since the narcissist pastor will rarely admit error or failure, the narcissist church will likely follow suit. If concealment is not an option, circumstances, outside forces, or sabotage may be blamed—anything so the fault does not belong to the pastor. If there is no other viable scapegoat, it is not uncommon for the narcissist pastor to blame the church members themselves and demand that they repent and right their wrongs against him.

### **Uniqueness**

Claims of uniqueness require comparison, a “them” that is not “us”. This creates an unresolvable dynamic tension between the two. “The pathological form of narcissistic collective self-love inevitably leads to rage against ‘them,’ that is, against those who fail to be part of ‘us’ because they differ in some significant way” (Brunner, 2002, p. 124). Churches need members and uniqueness attracts them, so they seek identifiers branding the church as unique. Thus, rebranding churches to promote church growth has become a major industry. Branding and rebranding are legitimate and nothing new. However, a new name and core values mean nothing if they were adopted only to change the church image.

### **Grandiosity**

Grandiosity and uniqueness are normal behaviors for narcissists, who tend to be tone-deaf regarding how others perceive their proclamations. Narcissistic bragging comes naturally, but it is exaggerated and often includes events that never happened. It is no different for the pastors of narcissistic churches. For example, a few years ago a church petitioned the local ministerial association demanding that its pastor become the next leader and strongly implied the results would be greatness for all. The petition failed.

### **Paranoia/Isolation**

The narcissist church will gradually withdraw from associations with other churches and their pastors, though it may not directly reflect the

paranoia of its pastor. This will manifest as a sense of superiority over other churches, which then have nothing of value to offer. Instead, other churches and outside ministries may be rejected over real or imagined offenses or inadequacies. Paranoia serves to further isolate the church and may lead to a sense of being persecuted even though there is no evidence for it. If the members feel they are under some form of outside attack they are likely to band more tightly together and add to the overcoming persecution section of the church narrative. Some will leave, but a strong sense of bonding is also likely. Jan Schwarz (2007), in writing about paranoid organizations, states “A paranoid organization is characterized by distrust, anxiety, and a permanent readiness to repel attack. The organization is highly sensitive to all kinds of threats, builds sophisticated control mechanisms and management information systems and constantly searches for the hidden intentions of others.” (p. 20).

At the most extreme, the narcissist church can be described as a cult where a warped gospel message proclaims that Truth can be found nowhere else. As the church turns ever further inward, the message of paranoia and isolation grows stronger.

### **Lack of Empathy**

Galatians 6:1–2 requires gentle restoration of church members found to be “in sin,” but gentle restoration is not the narcissist way. Violating the norms is an affront to both the church and the narcissist pastor that must not go unpunished. In one church a young woman confessed an affair to the pastor and was told she must confess to the entire church. Obviously repentant, and expecting comfort and forgiveness, she did the following Sunday—and was promptly told to leave and never come back (Puls 2020, p. 163). In this fashion the narcissist church draws its members ever deeper into a cold, rigid, and unforgiving conformity and ruthlessly expels anyone who resists.

As I have seen in multiple churches, people with questions or criticisms will be told privately that they would probably be much happier elsewhere, which is a shaded message to leave and never come back. Even more subtle are the places that begin a whispering campaign against someone that eventually cuts them off from their friends and makes it known that they simply are no longer welcome.

Conformity is enforced in this way.

### **Little Awareness of External Perceptions**

Like the narcissist, the narcissist church will have little awareness of external perceptions. External criticisms can be summarily dismissed because they do not comport with the internal narrative of uniqueness and greatness. The more isolated the church becomes the fewer outside interactions there will be until there are few to none. If the church is narcissistic enough, the members simply do not care what others think about them but are certain that the outside image is wonderful. Even so, the paranoia remains. Distrust and anxiety may predominate. Sensitivity to outside threats is maintained at a constant high level. While never announcing it, the staff and governing board are on a constant war footing as they scan for internal and external threats (Hunter, 2013).

There is an intentional escalation to this phenomenon and it is used to isolate the church and its members into a more cohesive and even cultic group: the leaders proclaim they are all under attack by unidentified outsiders who come with kind words and gestures but with terrible, evil intentions. The result is often tighter unity and deeper isolation.

### **Rationalization**

Andrew Brown (1997) of the University of Cambridge argues that while secular organizations tend to rationalize their less than ethical actions to the media, churches seem more inclined to secretive internal rationalizations. Brown says that policy makers are often more inclined to satisfy their own personal motives and emotional needs than the requirements of their organizations. The result is that decisions are made for egocentric reasons, which then must be justified/rationalized (often un-self-consciously) internally by means of impressive-sounding reasons. The first major rationalizations may be found in the upper strata of leadership: the pastor and his or her most trusted (as far as a narcissist can trust) associates. This becomes possible because organizations, including many churches, allow dark or hidden places to be created where the status quo is in control; there is nothing to see and no questions may be asked. The social order of organizations

creates rationalizations that in turn highlight favorable events and obscure or cloak unfavorable events. The result is that memories are controlled and identities are more rigidly fixed.

Brown (1997) aptly summarizes the dilemmas and traps that churches and their members are susceptible to:

Moral rewards, which an individual accrues as a result of a perceived correspondence between his/her morality and the several aspects of the organization, are similarly associated with positive self-esteem. These rewards encourage the individual to self-aggrandize (“because I am a member of a virtuous or worthwhile organization, I too am virtuous or worthwhile”), to deny moral improprieties and questioning of the individual’s social utility (“since I participate in a good organization, my actions must be good”), to rationalize actions (“my actions are prompted by virtuous motives”), to possess a sense of entitlement (“the virtuous should receive”), and to engage in attributional egotism (“since I am good, so are the consequences of my actions”). (Brown, 1997, p. 666).

## Church Disintegration

The narcissist, whether overt or covert, is inherently self-destructive. Narcissistic paranoia can lead to church disintegration where the church loses internal cohesiveness and splits into competing or even warring factions. In my experience the triggering event is often a rebellion against the narcissist pastor. As the conflict escalates, each faction may become more and more deeply enmeshed in its own self-righteous truth-story that it uses to justify what would otherwise be unjustifiable acts against competing factions. It can reach the point where inconvenient facts are summarily rejected. The very meaning of words is questioned and distorted to justify the actions of one group towards the others (Glasl, 1999, pp. 104-105). The eventual outcome may be the complete destruction of the church, which this writer recently witnessed in New York.

## Conclusion

Stein (2003) argues that extreme organizational narcissism has five attributes:

1. Members will believe their organization to be extraordinarily special and unique. This is not normal pride but is instead highly exaggerated to the point of delusion.
2. A powerful sense of self-aggrandizement and entitlement leads to a kind of unconscious imperialism or an unconscious omnipotence: The organization is all powerful and . . . cannot recognize that anything of value might exist outside its boundaries.
3. The organization believes itself to be omniscient; that is, it has access to all information, both internal and external, that is relevant to the organization and interprets the information correctly.
4. The delusion allows it not only to be dismissive of other organizations, people and information, but also to treat them with a kind of triumphant contempt.
5. These attributes become permanently embedded in organizational functioning (pp. 537–538).

If Stein is correct and the attributes of extreme narcissism become permanently embedded in the church culture, when the pastor leaves, the church may perpetuate its own narcissism by seeking out another narcissist pastor.

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