

Editorial: Addressing a minister's social media improprieties

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How should a church deal with a minister's social media improprieties?

This is a hot topic after [Matt Chandler's announced leave of absence](#) from The Village Church.

What follows is not my opinion about Chandler. I've known of Chandler since the mid-1990s when he led a Bible study in Abilene called Grace. We were students at Hardin-Simmons University at the time. Our paths didn't cross then and haven't since. Therefore, I can't speak about him as a person.

Rather, what follows are my thoughts about a cautionary tale being lived out in front of us. Wise churches and ministers will pay attention. In our schadenfreude culture that revels in a celebrity's humiliation—especially when that celebrity is a minister—churches and ministers won't be able to ignore the tale completely. It's already viral.

In case you doubt Chandler is a "celebrity pastor," he has more than 399,000 Twitter followers, more than 135,000 Instagram followers, a public Facebook group with more than 6,300 members, and The Village Church YouTube channel with more than 115,000 subscribers. Yes, Chandler meets the description of a "celebrity pastor."

I point this out because it means the humiliation he acknowledged Aug. 28 is a very public humiliation. It also means how The Village Church handles the situation will be watched by a wide public, maybe including you.

One thing you shouldn't take from the numbers above: Don't think there's no lesson in this for you if your follower count is in the tens or hundreds.

Accountability in a Baptist church

The Village Church is a Baptist church. Those who've asked my opinion on the matter are pastors and leaders of Baptist churches. As Baptists, we consider Chandler's leave to be a local church matter. In other words, the Baptist principle of local church autonomy is active here.

That's little comfort to the watching public. So, I should explain what I mean in this instance.

What I mean here is how Chandler should be held accountable is for the leadership and membership of The Village Church to determine. It is not for the viewing public to determine. If, however, something more than ["unguarded and unwise," frequent and familiar messaging](#) took place, others may need to get involved.

Notice: I do not think Chandler should not be held accountable. He should.

Others who might want and need to be involved in Chandler's accountability are those other organizations he serves, such as the Acts 29 Network of which Chandler is [board president](#). Here again, this is for Acts 29 to determine. As it turns out, [Acts 29 has asked Chandler "to step away from his Acts 29 speaking engagements during this time."](#)

A church has an obligation to hold its leadership accountable for improprieties. A wise church will put in place accountability measures ahead of improprieties, establishing a system—however simple or complex—that provides for ongoing and preventative accountability. And that accountability structure should be held accountable as well, so it doesn't become leaders covering up for leaders.

Many churches will want to extend grace to a minister who tested the boundaries of appropriate interactions. Christians are to be people of grace, after all. Wise churches will make clear what grace should look like in the given situation, being sure grace does not absolve responsibility or accountability.

How any church can be proactive

As mentioned above, a wise church will have accountability measures in place ahead of improprieties, as Chandler said The Village Church had. One of these accountability measures should be a digital communication policy governing social media, texting, email and any other form of digital communication. As the saying goes: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Even the smallest churches should have stated expectations for how ministry staff and leaders will conduct themselves on social media, texting, email, video calls and other communications.

A wise church will take time before something happens to talk through how improprieties will be addressed should they occur. Waiting until a situation occurs to come up with a response allows pressured thinking to cloud sound judgment and emotions to drive responses into reactions.

Another preventative step

Chandler wondered aloud if his unwise and unguarded direct messaging was an expression of “unhealth” resulting from the pace of his work hours or the difficulties of the last several years. This sounds like a cop-out to many watchers, but many leaders know just how stress and fatigue wear on a person’s decision-making ability.

Church, do you know what hours your ministry staff is keeping? If not, why not? Do you know how well-rested they are and how mentally and spiritually healthy they are? If not, why not?

Church, do you care enough about your ministry staff to keep abreast of their health—gently, graciously and appropriately? If not, why not?

Whether stress or fatigue led Chandler to engage in “inappropriate messaging,” the truth is your ministry staff most likely is not recovered yet from the stress and fatigue of the last two years. That level of stress and fatigue could be killing your ministry staff, and it’s not doing you any favors, either.

Church, you need to ensure your ministry staff recuperates from high-stress and fatiguing seasons. If nothing else, giving them some breathing room might spare you a leadership crisis.

We’re not immune

Not every church is Baptist—holding to local church autonomy. Not every church or minister is seen by hundreds of thousands of people on a regular basis. But every church is situated in a community, a community watching Christians for signs of Jesus. We have a responsibility as the body of Christ to conduct ourselves accordingly.

None of us are above where Matt Chandler finds himself right now. We may not do exactly what he did—engaging in direct messages he shouldn’t have. But we all are capable of doing something that compromises our character or reputation, that lets our family, friends and church down—even with safeguards in place.

There’s no two ways about it; Chandler’s situation isn’t good news. But what churches and ministers can learn from it and put into action is the

stuff good news is made of.

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