

# LEADERSHIP, CHILD ABUSE AND THE CHURCH

*By David Townsend*

I am going to talk about some aspects of the church and its function, and some of the problems we face, including child abuse. I do not wish to denigrate the terrible offense of child abuse; I want to deal with it in its context. This paper is brief and incomplete.

I am using a theory of psychology: theory because it is derived from observation and anecdote. There are many things we don't know about the operation of the mind. Human behavior is not a simple cause and effect system.

There are schools of psychology, some of which bitterly disagree with others in the use of terminology and structure. So there will be some who say that my opinion is warped or utterly worthless. You will have to decide what you believe.

First, we need to be clear that we are dealing with complex human behaviour, and we talk about trends. Second, we must also recognise that there are no simple disorders. Disordered personalities vary in the same way as well ones. That is: there is always more than one inner process happening at the same time. Third, that this article is simplified and leaves out a lot of material. Fourth, no one is perfect.

Underlying many mental disorders is neurosis. It is an old fashioned term that is coming back into vogue because increasing attention is being given to the long disregarded teaching of a disciple of Freud who broke with him, Otto Rank. There is now genetic support for some of his work. Neurosis creates a number of conditions to which modern psychology has given names and definitions. Narcissism is one. The narcissistic response ranges from minor symptoms to pathological Narcissism. And most of us have traces of the narcissistic response and characteristics.

There are a number of causes of the abuse of children. Only one form of child abuse is sexual. The physical and emotional abuse of children is widespread, mostly legal, and equally damaging as sexual abuse. There are also a number of causes of sexual abuse. I want to deal with the particular problem that seems to beset the church.

## The Myth of Narcissus.

The problem we have to deal with is Narcissism. The Greek myth of Narcissus tells us that he was a Greek youth who fell in love with his own reflection. One background item which is relevant is that the myth is set in a society where a sexual relationship between a man and a boy was permitted.

Narcissus was the son of the river god Cephisus and the nymph Liriope.

A seer said of the infant Narcissus that he would live to a ripe old age provided that he never knew himself. This is one key to narcissism. Narcissistic people generally don't recognise or understand their condition.

Narcissus was a youth whose beauty was as dazzling as he was scornful. He spurned lovers of both sexes, and came to the age of sixteen leaving behind a group of angry suitors. One of these was the Nymph Echo, who can only repeat what others say. Her appearance in the story is important, because narcissists create a false self which is an echo of other selves they perceive.

One day Narcissus contemptuously sent a sword to a persistent suitor, Ameinius, inviting him to commit suicide, which he did, calling on the gods for vengeance. Artemis heard his cry, and decreed that Narcissus would fall in love, some versions say with the first person he met, but denying him love's consumption.

Narcissus came to a pool of still water and bent over to drink. In the pool he saw a reflection, a beautiful boy with whom he fell in love but could not possess.

In time he recognized it as his own reflection. Grief consumed him, but he was also pleased to know that he would never have to be true to anyone but himself. [Another narcissistic characteristic.]

In despair he plunged a dagger into his breast and died. The blood flowed out into the earth and from it rose the white and red flower, the Narcissus.

The very important thing to understand is that is that Narcissus loved not himself, but his own reflection. We project some inner areas of our selves onto other people. For the Narcissist, this projection makes up a key area of his function.

I am going to talk about men and boys because this has been the commonest problem area for churches. The underlying system

appears to form in a similar way for girls, but tends to express itself less often and differently.

When a child is born, there is a bond between the child and his mother. The mother is the lifegiver. The child actively seeks the mother, the mother's breast, and is caught up in active participatory love. Some children, maybe over half, experience some rejection by the mother. Pay careful attention to these words. The child experiences some rejection by the mother. It does not mean that the mother rejected the child, or was conscious of rejecting the child, or in fact rejected the child at all. While it is possible in some families to see the rejection by the mother, in most we have no idea why the child felt rejected. For the child, it is a pre-verbal experience.

There has been a suggestion that narcissism is increasing in our society because women are no longer conditioned to be totally focused on a child from birth in the context of the home, but are distracted by other issues such as rights, career possibilities, financial tensions, etc, etc. While this is conjecture, the rise in narcissism isn't.

Where this rejection is experienced as severe, the hurt child moves away from the lifegiver [the mother] and retreats into isolation. But that way you die. The child knows this [unconscious response], so he creates an outer, false self, that is, personality, to approach and please the mother who is the provider of love [read: food, warmth and dryness] and also consequently, the father. This is not deliberate; it is formed before the child can think in words.

The false persona or mask is a pleaser. It has to be to survive. In some people it is a pathetic little pleaser, but in others it can be a powerful personality which achieves fame. The pleaser absolutely needs recognition and will do anything to obtain it. Some famous politicians, actors and businessmen have been narcissists. As have many clergy.

But deep inside is a hurt little boy who knows he is worthless, and believes that all his achievements are a sham. He is a mover away from, a retreator into his own self.

For a Normal child you must imagine an integrated personality directed outward. Loved, safe, confident, curious, amused.

For a Narcissist child you must imagine an inwardly focused personality with a hurt core and outward-facing outer shell, with the focus of consciousness able to move from one to the other. Unloved (in his perception), unsafe, unconfident, self-curious, and depressed internally but outwardly cheerful.

The focus of awareness in a narcissist is mostly in the false self. In severe cases this is so constant that the person is not really aware of the inner child, only of discomfort, stress, and limited behaviour. For others, the focus of awareness shifts back and forward from the false self to the hurt child. An illustration of this is the number of comedians who make us laugh but are deeply depressed off stage.

The child who moves lovingly toward the mother and experiences her acceptance and love develops a core which I call Dynamic Being. Being is not enough because many people think of this as passive and inert. Dynamic is about expressed power and interaction – in this case all good.

The child who does not has two major problems. First, he goes into an “away from” inner state and a “toward” outer state, which may at times paralyse him. He may barely act for himself. The only action will come out of the need of the character of his false self. As well as this he will not finish anything, because that would give the lie to his self-identity of failure.

Second, he is in a relationship with his father that has a hurting loop. This is also paralyzing. He can't succeed at anything or he will lose the game.

The inner rejected child, in extreme cases, knows that he is so small and bad that the right thing to do is to hurt himself. This both affirms that he exists and provides the punishment he thinks he deserves. Further, in order to receive the stimulation that assures him that he exists, he will irritate his father [who is most probably also narcissistic], so that his father gets angry and punishes him. He will fail at activities or be disobedient to irritate his father, be punished and instructed to succeed, fail again, and so set up a loop that keeps his place in the family. If you can't be loved, at least you belong. He believes that he is unloved and unlovable, and keeps this loop running until he dies –probably long after his father is dead, unless something compels change.

Hence we have salesmen who can't sell, Public Servants who can't make decisions or take responsibility, business leaders who can't decide and act in their company's best interest, clergy who can't develop a parish, and so on.

Because he believes that he is unloved, he must be unlovable. He is therefore also meaningless. He projects this onto the universe and asks, What is the purpose of life? Answer, Nothing, because he is nothing.

In compensation, his outer false self tends towards the grandiose. This may range from slight exaggeration and self-inflating falsehoods to full blown grandiosity that is ridiculous to observers.

His need for stimulation to reassure himself that he exists goes beyond this in extreme cases. Stimulation can be produced by cruelty, torture, and killing.; In a lesser scenario, domestic violence. The drive to exercise power also comes into this as into child abuse.

The tensions created by narcissism don't only create sexual problems. The pain can be dulled by alcohol, drugs, and risky behaviour.

The false self that he creates is a pleaser. First to please mother, then father then teachers and anyone in authority, bishops, employers [all of whom he may at the same time deliberately annoy as an extension of his father], friends, and the general community. This false self may be very skilled and effective, at a level he consciously/unconsciously decides is appropriate.

This person is also flawed. The false self may take him to the top of business, entertainment or the Public Service. Somewhere near the top, the pressure may crack the person and trigger the self-destructive behaviour that is always a potential part of every narcissist. Look at politicians, businessmen, and entertainers, who have destroyed themselves by "uncharacteristic" actions. A good many examples come to mind.

We live in a society which is narcissistic, and most of us have some narcissistic traits. Many Anglicans, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics belong to congregations which are basically narcissistic. One characteristic of this is that they are a safe, non-confronting church. Although there is argument that a parish should be primarily evangelistic, they hide from this by conformity to regular and predictable internal affairs. There may be a lot of good in this, e.g. communities are formed, but it omits something that should characterise the church.

This type of church makes an ideal home for a narcissistic leader. The church provides an area where a person can be a clergyman, and receive lots of adulation, without ever having to reveal his inner self, as he might have to do in a face-to-face or group encounter evangelistic situation. And he can't reveal his inner self, if he is a clergyman, because that inner self is a hurt little boy who probably doesn't believe in God any more, because he tried praying to God for salvation when he was small and got no answer, of course, because he knew he didn't deserve it in the first place. And that hurt little boy is

totally unsure of himself and would be devastated and destroyed by revealing his inner self.

It should be clear that this is not a problem confined to the church. Some types of narcissists move into areas where there is structure, such as the public service, certain businesses, teaching, and others. Some need greater adulation [narcissistic supply] and go into show business, politics, sales, and more.

Now another characteristic of narcissists is that they are auto-erotic. That means that their sexual focus is to stimulate themselves [it is a way of assuring themselves that they exist] but not to stimulate and interact with another as a person whose core was Dynamic Being. They are also in love with their own reflection, with their own self, which they project onto and so see themselves in others. But it is not the adult persona that is doing this; it is the hurt little boy inside, interacting through the false adult self. And the hurt little boy falls in love with himself, his own reflection, in other boys. As he has grown up, there have been peak periods when he wanted very badly to be loved, and much but not all of this happens around the years of puberty. The consequence is that he seeks out a boy who is a reflection of himself and enters into a relationship which will satisfy a number of his needs including the erotic.

Some, and I repeat some, auto-erotic narcissists who unconsciously see themselves reflected in boys take action to express this sexuality, and this results in a sexual incident or relationship.

There are other factors that are involved here but they don't alter the general form of this process. These include the projected need to be loved as a son, the normal drive to love a child, and, because he had a disturbed upbringing anyway, confused sexual roles. [Narcissists are generally described as pan-sexual: their sexuality may be directed towards men, women, boys, girls - of any age or a combination.] There are various types of expression of behavior depending on the presence of other history and personality disorders, which may make the person undertake high risk or violent behaviour, though this rarely seems to occur in the church.

The incidence of child pornography has highlighted other aspects of the problem. Material classified as child pornography from a psychological viewpoint ranges from pictures of children which provide a basis of fantasizing to photographs of outrageous sexual acts. For the paedophilic narcissist, these may provide stimulation to offend, as does any pornography, but are more likely to provide substitutory fantasies.

In many cases the boys the abuser falls in love with or wants to deal with are also hurt or dependent, probably narcissistic, and at the point in their lives they are looking for a saviour who is not their father. Along comes a rescuer in the form of the local Parish Priest or youth worker.

Our terrible difficulty is that there are many more other good people who are excellent and working for the good of the community and the well-being of children but whose caring is compromised by the offences of a few.

Carer child abuse is not confined to clergy and teachers and youth leaders. Indeed some of the most extensive problems have been with musicians. The probability is that the majority of offenses take place in families. They are not reported so often because the children on the one hand love the offender but on the other hand hate the abuse, but need the love and prefer abuse to going into care, along with identification and publicity. Families hide the offence, often from their own awareness. Individuals do not report offences because they know that it will destroy the family and put their future at risk. Offenses by a public carer are easier to acknowledge. The media also pay them more attention.

A percentage of the community love reading about the sexual activity of public figures and the media makes money out of this. The problem of domestic child abuse and the plight of children who are abused is largely ignored, unless a "human interest" story can be generated.

Another difficulty lies in research. Such statistics from surveys that we have, mostly American, indicates that the majority of offenses against children occur in the home with a relative or close family friend. Some of the surveys into child abuse are flawed because some statistical psychologists have tended to say that child abuse has to do with children, which means pre-puberty, which now means under 13, and they have ignored data relating to the 13 and over group. Many of the prosecutions of clergy and carers have related to offenses against boys in the 13 to 15 age group and up to 17 years, and while these may be technically adolescents, being technically correct has given us some flawed research into the incidence of child abuse in the community.

While on the subject of ages, we should note that one of the reasons for the increase in child abuse is the falling age of puberty. If narcissistic child abusers are mostly focused on boys around the age of puberty, then their attention has shifted to a lower age with it.

This fall has meant that the onset of puberty in the UK has dropped from an average 16.5 years for females and 17.5 for males in 1840, to 11.9 and 13.1 years respectively in 1993, and it is still dropping year-by-year. This means that in 2004 the ages are about 11.5 for girls and 12.7 years for boys, lower in some communities. This biological shift, intertwined with economic and class factors, may be one of the main forces underlying the social construction of 'the paedophile' during the last hundred years in the West. It is something of a mystery that the age of puberty has been decreasing by an average of four months every ten years for the last century and a half. No explanation, including improved nutrition, or change in the dark/light ratio after candles were replaced by gas then electricity, or hormones in the food chain, amounts to more than a speculative hypothesis!

“Child abuse” as we know it today only moved to prominence when the arrival of puberty dropped into the age range which we now classify as childhood. Until that happened, the behaviour would have been seen as a homosexual relationship. Look at the age of sexual interest for Oscar Wilde, or Shakespeare’s alleged youth lover, and so on: They are 17 + years.

How does the church prevent child abuse happening?

The simple answer is to prevent as many people as possible who may have a narcissistic personality disorder from being ordained.

But, one of the characteristics of the disorder is that young men probably won't be consciously aware themselves of what their problem is, and it is a condition that is particularly hard for others to spot and diagnose in the young. The person is so unconsciously skilled at maintaining and living in the false persona that it is not evident.

One possible solution is to not ordain anyone under thirty. The candidate would have had to demonstrate public leadership, and I mean leadership, in a field outside the church, perhaps commercial or military. The reason for this is that it appears to be fairly hard for most narcissists to lead in a fiercely competitive environment.

This would rule out people who were carers, welfare workers, musicians, poets, and a lot of creative people, who would have to minister in non-priestly or non-clergy roles.

Another possible solution is to recognise that maybe there is another way of being the church. Clergy were once called elders, because they were, mostly – though there were exceptions. People with other

gifts of ministry exercised them under the direction of the elders. I would like to say that by the time you get to be a real elder, failures ought to be obvious, but I'm afraid that isn't always true.

On the other hand, this wouldn't go down very well in a narcissistic society where it is all about youth, and avoiding the elderly, and instant gratification, and really rapid change. The young don't recognise the value of elders, and the elders are probably mostly out of touch with the young, anyway.

There is yet another way. There are churches that don't have the problem, or have it in a much lesser degree. They generally require the clergy to be evangelists and self-revealers, leaders and innovators. Narcissists do not fit well into these roles

And, of course, the future church may do without employed clergy, and some of the structures we are familiar with in parishes.

One problem that has been given much attention is the covering up of offences by Bishops and others. Whatever the rights or wrongs of this, different knowledge and attitudes prevailed in the past and we need to recognise this. In the Roman Catholic Church in the USA the first Bishops Conference to look at the problem was in 1985, and they were told that there was no research on the causes of clergy child abuse and that this was now being undertaken. The study of child abuse by narcissistic personalities is mostly very recent, within the last twenty-five years. The problem of child abuse was known about, not only by Bishops, but also by the police and judiciary. Mostly no action was taken to resolve the matter. It was naughty but not for public discussion. In many cases the church leaders acted to protect its reputation and ignored complaints or bullied people into silence.

In addition there was still a dominance of Freudian thought which suggested that most memories of childhood abuse were fantasy. While undoubtedly some were, it meant then that all children's complaints were largely discounted, and children were made to feel guilty for making accusations.

Although extraordinary measures are put in place to promote ethical standards, churches are still not dealing with the real problem. They are sticking band-aids on a badly injured organism, instead of seeking real health. Real health lies in altering the structure that made the disease possible, and even there the risk is that they will throw out the baby with the bath water. There is hard work ahead to grow a church which is worthwhile.

Which brings us to what might be the right way to proceed for narcissistic clergy and parishes.

Historically psychologists have said that Narcissism is “incurable” and can only be modified. This is no longer acceptable. There are therapists who can help a willing narcissist make dramatic changes to bring their life to a fulfilling level. [See the books listed at the end.]

Helping a narcissist to maturity through therapy is a rough task. Most people would rather die than change, and do! The person will not usually admit that they have a problem, They are very defensive even if they do acknowledge the problem because they know that growth means the shattering of the personality they have been all their life, and starting over again in many areas. They continue working to defeat themselves so they will defeat therapy.

Good therapy starts with creativity and achievement brought about by changes in the hurt child’s perception of himself.

The trick is to make contact with that hurt child inside and give him real self-esteem, personal power and a “towards” focus.

The personality at his centre must be turned into a Dynamic Being, given life and energy, love, hope and purpose. He can keep the skills of the false self, but operate from an authentically growing inner self. It does not happen easily. Sometimes mature men decide enough is enough, and walk out of their old life to find another life somewhere else. But mostly a therapist has to wrench the hurt child screaming and struggling out of his envelope of false self into the light of day.

And providing hope for a parish? They need to try it the same way. They would need to identify who in the parish were its real heart, then identify the style of the Dynamic Being. They would have to recognise that some people who make up the false self would slip from being key figures in a parish to being amongst the halt and the lame who were cared for. Parishes would have to avoid the refuge of fundamentalism and take up the challenge of the present age.

An individual Dynamic Being is recognised by an enthusiasm for life, a “Towards” approach to the world, a desire for relationships, a sense of humour, a commitment to family and community, a gratitude, and a desire to contribute to the present and future of others.

A church that expressed this in its life and worship would grow. It might mean, for instance, that primary public services were non prayer book, that participation in a cell-group was required for membership, etc. And getting it achieved would not be easy.

Where, you may ask, is Jesus Christ in all this? The New Testament church is evangelistic. I said evangelistic, and not evangelical. And looking to the future, it seems unlikely that heaven is like an Anglican/Episcopalian /Catholic parish for ever. Christians have to discern the will of Jesus Christ for the present, now, and by the nature of things they are all going to discern it differently. The challenge is not only to grow the church, but to stay in harmony with other Christians as they do it.

A few thoughts about abused children.

The sexual abuse of children frequently causes severe psychological damage and is an evil. I regret that any children get abused in any way. I also regret that the bringing of abuse to light of legal process tends to further traumatise those who have been hurt. I regret that people have been compelled to hang onto hurt so that they can give evidence, or have chosen to hang onto hurt so that they can obtain financial compensation or maintain a self-image as a victim.

The most important thing that can be done for those who have been hurt is to provide them with good counseling and a supportive family (and church if they wish) where they can grow through this into a satisfying life.

The church needs to provide a framework that as far as possible prevents the abuse of children. I think in a parish setting – and I am assuming a lively growing parish with a good Dynamic Being, children's and youth activities involving any children or youth in the church need to be overseen by a committee of parents who are advised periodically by a competent psychologist or therapist as well as other risk management experts. This committee would have prudential role to ensure that there was no unreasonable risk, whether it be in climbing a mountain or being alone too much in the company of a leader or any other circumstance they decided was inappropriate. The trick is to draw the fine line between sufficient risk for the children to grow, and sufficient care to prevent avoidable harm – as in any family.

This committee would also provide a support framework for education and training of all children and youth with a special concern for dependent and disordered children, so that they have a better opportunity to grow to a satisfactory maturity.

The Anglican Church in the Diocese of Melbourne, Australia, and many others has developed and is further developing protocols for the handling of complaints against clergy and church workers, along with

codes of practice for the behavior of clergy and church workers. This at least means that in this Diocese people who make a complaint must be heard and the matter must be investigated.

The problem of abusive clergy in the Roman Catholic Church appears to be exacerbated by the seminarian training system and celibacy. This church is also taking steps to change.

There is also a continuous process to upgrade the selection and training of clergy. While this should dramatically reduce child abuse I cannot say how effectively it will help develop the church.

We have come out of an era where the Parish Priest was tightly integrated with family life and personal care. This seems an ideal, but it provided the opportunity for abuse. Avoiding the opportunity for abuse appears to be taking us into the concept of professional clergy who live away from the parish, work hours from an office, and only see other people in the presence of an observer, or from the altar and pulpit. All of this will destroy the church as effectively as abuse, and Christians have to find something better. But the better will not be a compromise but a meta-position – above and better than anything they have had before. This requires outstanding Christian leaders, and parishes that can accept the exploration and change.

### *References*

Note that “Narcissism” is used in some writers for a tightly described pathological condition [albeit that it mostly occurs mixed with other disorders/symptoms, rarely as a “pure’ condition], and others as a wider disorder of the personality which underlies many other disorders of varying degrees from mild disfunction to severe personality disturbance.

“Narcissism, A New Theory”, by Paul Symington [Karnac Books 1993]  
“The Structure of Personality – Modeling Personality Using NLP and Neuro-Semantics” by L. Michael Hall Ph.D, Bob Bodenhamer D.Min., Richard Bolstad Ph.D., and Margot Hamblett. [Crown House Publishing 2001]

“Malignant Self Love” & various works by Sam Vaknin, Ph.D, locatable on the Web. An exploration of his writings will give you an idea of the variety and complexity of the subject.

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