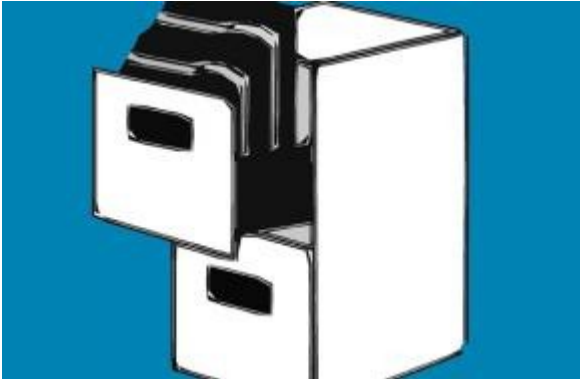


Shelter in the parsonage: Case by case

by [Ellen Blue](#) in the [September 4, 2013](#) issue



Congregational life presents a broad range of conflicts and dilemmas in which theological and ecclesial issues are entwined with the complex drama of human relations. Such challenges are also moments in which Christian witness can be clarified. This fictional narrative, which is followed by an analysis, is the fourth in a series.

Ian and Abigail had been copastors at Elm Street Church for about three months. This urban congregation with about 200 in worship each Sunday morning was the most problematic place of service that either of them had ever experienced. One difficulty—though by no means the only one—was the congregation’s continuing attachment to Bradley, the former minister. The Elm Street congregation had been established five years previously through the merger of two other congregations, and Bradley had served as its founding pastor.

The long list of severely troubled parishioners they were encountering included Roberta, a woman whom Abigail judged to be in her late thirties, just a few years younger than she and Ian. Roberta was about three years into a second marriage; it was also a second marriage for her husband, Hank. There were no children from any of these unions.

Roberta and Hank had met at Elm Street Church. Bradley had performed their wedding. The congregation had a strong emotional investment in the couple even

though Hank stopped attending worship soon after the wedding. Roberta continued to attend faithfully, adding her solo-quality voice to the choir most Sunday mornings and participating in a smaller choral group that performed at Elm Street and in other venues around the city, enhancing the reputation of the church in the area.

Soon after Ian and Abigail arrived at the church, Roberta had come to Ian for counseling about problems in her marriage. Although she seemed very upset, she was not able to articulate what was bothering her very well. He had tried to refer her to a therapist. Although she held a teaching job that had good health benefits, she insisted that she couldn't submit therapy fees to her insurance company for fear she'd be fired and that she didn't have the money to pay the fees herself. She ignored the information that both Ian and Abigail offered about free sources of help.

Several parishioners had spoken to Abigail about their fears that Roberta was being battered by Hank. She certainly exhibited some of the signs, including frequent bruises for which she gave unconvincing explanations whenever questioned. When she came in one day to discuss her marital problems with Abigail, the pastor asked her point blank whether she was battered. Roberta denied it. In the next breath, she explained that Hank was out of work and therefore under extreme stress. She insisted that although her first husband had abused her, Hank had never hit her. Neither Ian nor Abigail believed these assurances.

Even though Ian and Abigail told Roberta on several occasions that they were not trained as therapists and that Roberta should follow through on the counseling referrals they had provided, she did not do so. She kept begging them for appointments instead. On one occasion, Abigail had acquiesced and made an appointment at an inconvenient time—but Roberta simply failed to show up for the session. When Abigail called her three days later, Roberta did not mention the missed appointment until Abigail questioned her, and then she just said that she had been "busy" that day and "couldn't call."

By that time, Abigail had come to expect such behavior. Roberta had frequently demonstrated her unreliability. For instance, she had agreed five weeks ahead of time to organize a program for a women's group that Abigail led. Roberta then called Abigail just an hour before the meeting to say that she just didn't feel like coming. When Abigail explained to the participants that Roberta had canceled at the last minute and that she would have to improvise a program, they laughed at Abigail for thinking that Roberta would show up.

In another instance, Roberta came to the early service one Sunday morning to perform with the choral group, which was scheduled to perform at the later service as well. About 15 minutes before the second service was to start, she decided she was too upset about her marriage to sing. When she came to Abigail's office to say she was going home, she broke down in tears. Abigail explained that she had to leave for the 11 o'clock worship service, at which she was scheduled to preach; Roberta kept on talking and crying. Abigail offered to send someone in to stay with her during worship; Roberta said she didn't want anyone else. Abigail tried to make an agreement to see her after worship or any other time that day; Roberta said she wanted to go home and sleep, wouldn't want to come back later and wanted to talk right then. Abigail finally left Roberta alone in the office and entered the sanctuary a few minutes late for worship.

In mid-September, Ian and Abigail were scheduled to attend a continuing education event in another state. Both of them were very much looking forward to a few days away—time to evaluate what was happening at Elm Street Church, time to relax, time away from the strain that the church's problems had put on their own relationship. They were to leave for the airport quite early on Monday morning. On Sunday evening they were busy with packing and last-minute details. Around 9 o'clock, the telephone rang. Abigail answered and heard Roberta's voice on the line.

"I know you're going to be out of town this week," she said. "Can I stay at your house while you're gone? Hank and I are having problems, and we just need some cooling-off time. I can't afford to go anywhere else. And Bradley and Monica always let me stay there."

A list of reasons for why this was not a good idea flashed through Abigail's mind. Her personal papers included not only records from her previous job as a consultant, some of which contained sensitive information about her clients' businesses, but also papers from her seminary internship, including "verbatim" of conversations with parishioners and assessments of how she had handled problems that occurred at that church. The house also contained documents that the previous pastor at Elm Street had compiled relating to a possible case of sexual misconduct on the part of a former staff member. Abigail kept all this material at home rather than in her church office precisely so that no one other than she and Ian would ever have access to them.

Even if she and Ian could arrange to get every sensitive piece of paper under lock and key before the next morning, Abigail just didn't want Roberta there. Abigail was an only child and had always been used to having privacy at home. Her level of trust in Roberta did not approach the level she would need to be comfortable about letting Roberta stay. The mere thought of Roberta being free to poke around in her things was offensive.

However, none of these reasons seemed like something she could put into words. Further, she knew that if she refused, it was possible that Hank would seriously injure Roberta while they were gone. The seconds were ticking past, and her hesitation already seemed uncomfortably long; she knew she had to say something.

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