

Church embezzlers rob congregations of trust

Diana Fishlock Religion News Service | Aug. 18, 2009

HARRISBURG, Pa. -- For 24 years, Barbara Myers worked with Barry R. Herr in a small church office where everybody knew everybody. Co-workers all knew when someone's family had a baby, a wedding or a death.

But they didn't know Herr was embezzling money -- more than \$1 million from the Lower Susquehanna Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, where he was treasurer. He used the money to buy classic cars, police said.

"He ripped off his own church," said Myers, a spokeswoman for the synod. "Where else do you trust people if not in a church environment?"

Last November, Hess was sentenced to 30 months in federal prison.

Churches, synagogues, and temples of every size have been victims because many don't have checks and balances when it comes to money, experts said.

"Churches have always assumed they were one big happy family and they didn't have to think about those things, and they were wrong," said Anson Shupe, who has written five books on church misconduct.

When a theft happens, "it's more than just an injury. People feel a lot more betrayed," Shupe said.

In central Pennsylvania last year, a former school secretary was sentenced to probation and community service for embezzling \$85,000 from the Good Shepherd School in Camp Hill, a Roman Catholic school.

In July, state police said the secretary of Mount Holly Springs United Methodist Church in Cumberland County embezzled more than \$35,000 during a seven-year period.

The Mount Holly Springs church is doing well despite some "stress and disappointment," said Jerry Wolgemuth, spokesman for the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church.

A small Episcopal church in Lycoming County was devastated after a treasurer embezzled \$117,000, police said.

The cases reported probably are the tip of the iceberg, said Tracy McCurdy, director of the state Bureau of Charitable Organizations.

"I think we're going to see an increase," she said.

Experts said the bad economy might prompt some people into embezzling who never did it before, and groups that wouldn't have reported it will do so now because they need to seek restitution.

"You run into this ethical dilemma: We're the church and we're supposed to forgive," Myers said. "That doesn't let you off for your legal responsibility. It's a crime."

In 2003, Scott Lee Chambers, 37, of Muncy, Pa., was sentenced to 15 to 30 months in state prison after he embezzled \$117,465 from St. James Episcopal Church in Muncy, which had an annual budget of just \$60,000, police said.

He wrote checks and used credit cards for trips to Florida and New England, exotic birds, and cremation for a dog.

"It just blew the church apart and it was almost destroyed," said the Rev. David Culbertson, who became pastor of St. James in 2004. "There was a lot of anger. It did cause division among members of the church."

Church leaders were not only angry at Chambers, they were bitter at themselves, wondering how they had let this happen, Culbertson said.

Chambers is paying the church restitution, but the church probably never will recover \$117,000, said Robert S. Printzenhoff, a former vestry member. "I know the first check was less than \$10."

"I have been able to forgive and forget, but there are a lot of people who have not done that or can't do that and it affects the giving of the families and that's where we're hurting now," Printzenhoff said.

Those who have been at victimized churches and schools describe a profound sadness and loss of innocence.

"There are often lawyers and very savvy business people sitting on the boards, and they often feel very embarrassed," said Valerie J. Munson, assistant director of the Terrence J. Murphy Institute for Catholic Thought, Law, and Public Policy at the University of St. Thomas School of Law in Minneapolis.

Sometimes, donations drop off because people are afraid to trust again. Churches can face years of legal and auditing fees.

And church leaders sometimes face finger-pointing by the congregation, Shupe said.

Robin A. Murtha of Mechanicsburg blamed her theft from Good Shepherd School in Camp Hill on a shopping addiction. She repaid the money, and Harrisburg Bishop Kevin C. Rhoads wrote the court a letter seeking leniency for her.

"A tragic case such as this puts a faith community in a position of focusing attention on two key elements of our faith: justice and mercy," said Fr. Paul Helwig, pastor of Good Shepherd parish and school. "In this case, the wrong was redressed by the judicial process, while at the same time the outcome of the process was responsive to sincere requests for compassion and mercy."

Often treasurers, secretaries or clergy begin stealing a small amount of money, believing they will put it back. "And they realize that goes undetected, and maybe they're not able to replace it the way they thought, and they just get in deeper," Munson said.

Looking back, Myers and her co-workers at the Lutheran synod wondered whether they had missed something. When someone questioned Herr, he gave them a lot of accounting jargon that no one understood, Myers said. "And you feel stupid and you let it go."

Myers said the synod elected a new volunteer treasurer and instituted more checks and balances.

"We have new auditors, new accounting practices," she said. "The new treasurer is a CPA."

[Diana Fishlock writes for The Patriot-News in Harrisburg, Pa.]

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