

## Analysis of Pastor Tom Harder's Ministerial Sexual Misconduct Documentation Submitted 2/15/2021 - Stephanie Krehbiel, PhD and Jay Yoder

### A breakdown of Pastor Tom Harder's Grooming and Ministerial Sexual Misconduct

- Throughout his interactions with his target, as well as in the subsequent accountability process, Harder repeatedly, and with self-awareness, blurs the lines between pastor, romantic/sexual pursuer, husband, "adult male with needs," and friend. He uses this "role-slippage" to attempt to sexualize a relationship with a 22-year-old college student thirty years younger than he is, then uses it again to manipulate his professional peers into minimizing his offense.
- When convenient for minimizing punishment, he describes a "friendship" with "[feelings of emotional attraction](#)." When helpful for grooming purposes, he presents himself as a spiritual expert/relationship mentor. When [assessing his own responsibility](#), he portrays himself as an "adult male" with "natural needs," emphasizing the "complicated" nature of his feelings.
- Throughout his messaging of the student and the subsequent accountability process, Harder's "role-slippage" achieves distinct goals: to be perceived with authority - or not; to be in a role with high ethical and care responsibilities - or not. Moment to moment, he dispatches new descriptors for himself with discrete purposes: eliciting the most sympathetic response from the person with whom he is relating at the time.
- His messages combine inappropriately intimate sharing about his personal struggles with repeated, subtle sexual innuendo. This combination is a hallmark grooming technique of abusive clergy, as it confounds an empathic target with the choice between expressing concern for the perpetrator or calling out a behavior that the perpetrator can easily deny and blame on their target's "oversensitivity" or misinterpretation.

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They [survivors] had no frame of reference for seeing and recognizing a trusted religious leader's sexual misbehavior, but they had cognitive frameworks for mistaken meaning in social situations. All of us have misread the behavior of others at one time or another, and we learn to "give the benefit of the doubt" so as to read the best possible meaning into the behavior of someone we trust.

- Garland and Argueta, 2010

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The student avoids engaging Harder's romantic and sexual suggestions until he directly pushes her to, at which point she writes, "i had a feeling that's what you meant, but I thought I'd give you the benefit of the doubt... and offer you an easy way out." Later, in his [response](#) to his [sexual misconduct charge](#), Harder tries to argue that the student misperceived his intentions, writing, "does a sexual interpretation of a message make it sexual by default?"

Throughout his communications with the student, Harder states several times that he doesn't want to "cross boundaries." However, he directly and indirectly places the onus for stopping his boundary violations on the student herself, later implying that the problem rests more with her misinterpretation of his intentions than with his own unethical decision to force his intentions onto her.

His repeated mention of boundaries has the added benefit, to him, of providing the appearance of ethical discernment in the event of getting caught. Whether deliberate or not, this self-protective measure seems to have been largely effective, as Harder's Western District Conference (WDC) peers [do not identify manipulative intent in these statements](#), despite the overwhelming amount of pressure that his demands for feedback inevitably place on a 22-year-old.

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“Well [S], I hope that's not TMI! But you asked.”

“So please let me know if anything I have said makes you uncomfortable in any way.”

“If I have just added to your confusion or sense of “complication” then I apologize, and probably crossed a boundary I shouldn't have.”

“If this is troubling or upsetting or confusing for you, or if sharing this with you damages your trust towards me or any other pastor for that matter, then I deeply regret that, and ask for forgiveness.”

- Pastor Tom Harder

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- The entire correspondence at issue here unfolds over the course of a week. At the end of that week, within the span of just over 24 hours, Harder moves from making a particularly disconcerting comment about enviously watching the student “hanging all over” her love interest to declaring, “The ‘crush’ I described is completely a thing of the past.” To read a trajectory of thoughtful learning about the inappropriateness of his communication into the span of one day simply strains credulity too far. Harder pushes the student over and over until he finally realizes that she won’t respond the way he wants her to and may in fact reveal their correspondence to his wife; at that point, he quickly pivots to damage control.

### WDC Accountability Lens Failure

- The institutional response from the outset prioritizes Harder’s restoration to full-credentialed ministry, as opposed to prioritizing the prevention of future harm.
- In their [initial assessment](#) of Harder’s behavior, WDC investigators observe his role-pivoting, but they frame it as a battle between his better and worse selves, rather than a deliberate choice to slip in and out of his pastoral role. They quote the two leaders of the church trip on which Harder targeted the student: “He didn’t have control of his feelings” (Doug Miller). “Alarm bells should have gone off sooner for him” (Patricia Shelly). Harder clearly latches onto this sympathetic interpretation of his actions in [his initial response to the allegations and charge](#).
- While Harder’s targeting of the complainant begins on this trip, the reassurances of the trip leaders that they had no other reports from students is seen as adequate outreach to other potential victims on that trip. This judgment is made despite Harder’s own assertion in his communication with the complainant that he had “had a crush on” and “fallen in love with” “multiple college students.” Harder is allowed to minimize and question the ways his behaviors and their impacts are named, and to define and redefine and redefine again his roles and responsibilities as a pastor / adult male with natural needs / misguided friend / narcissist / INTJ personality type.

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“Cover-ups are best understood not as nefariously orchestrated plots that are conceived in whole and then executed by a few bad actors, but as a complex series of decisions both influenced by and reflective of shared institutional values and priorities - usually, the priority of institutional self-preservation over the wellbeing of survivors.”

- Scarsella and Krehbiel, 2019

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- An accountability lens that prioritized preventing future harm would assess Harder's likelihood of harming another woman based on his past abuse, his minimization of the abuse, his capacity for manipulation, and his demonstrated attitudes concerning male sexuality. With those factors considered, most experts in sexual abuse would find him likely to reoffend if returned to a position with access, authority, and regard.
- WDC instead assesses Harder based on self-reporting and, after he engaged in required counseling and committee meetings, finds that he has done the required accountability work, and [reaffirms his credentials](#).
- Harder's wife, Pastor Lois Harder, also credentialed by WDC, is viewed as an effective deterrent to keep Harder from abusing further in settings such as Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp, despite the demeaning implications and obvious conflicts of interest this creates for her. The notion of a wife as a preventative measure emerges from victim-blaming patriarchal logic (also known as rape culture) that forces women to accept responsibility for managing and preventing male sexual predation.
- Harder's cluster of manipulative behaviors extends beyond sexual manipulation. His navigation of WDC's "accountability" system demonstrated an ability to exploit the restorative lens WDC used, and the theology of grace.
- WDC leadership's interactions with the complainant lack sensitivity and trauma awareness, encouraging a posture of indebtedness from the complainant and relying on coercive spiritual language to push her towards "forgiveness" and "closure." In one instance, when the complainant expresses sympathy for investigative committee member Kathy Neufeld Dunn (also liaison to the complainant) Dunn responds, "You're right. It's not easy—because I appreciate both of you" (the complainant and Harder).

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I know you have experienced much healing & restoration. You are a strong, young woman of faith. God is faithful, and never abandons us, no matter what. I pray that reading the personal reflections will be a blessing to you. Perhaps they will be an important step toward closure. In this document, you'll read that Tom takes responsibility for what he did. He has asked forgiveness of church leadership, Lois, and others. At the final interview with him, I asked, "If the victim were here today, what would you say to her?" He said, "I would ask for her forgiveness." I believe he means it. WDC Leadership Commission restored Tom's ministerial credential on Aug. 31, 2012. The disciplinary process is finished. Please don't hesitate to contact me if I can do anything to help you find closure. I'm so glad to have had the privilege to get to know you just a bit. I pray you will use the many gifts God has given you for the glory of God.

- In Christ's peace,  
Kathy Neufeld Dunn

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'The Accountability Committee helped me immensely by repeatedly encouraging me to view my misconduct as a 'falling off the horse, then standing up and getting back on.' And finally, although this has been difficult at times for me to see and accept, this disciplinary process itself has indeed been nothing less than a process of grace, giving me the mandate to learn both how and what it means to get back up on the horse. Thanks be to God for the wondrous mystery of grace, even in the darkest of times.'

- Tom Harder, August 2012

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### **Ongoing effects**

- Harder was allowed “to get back up on the horse,” with a conference-endorsed, narcissistic framework for interpreting any future “falls.”
- In WDC's and MC USA's ongoing responses to Harder's sexual misconduct, there is resistance to understanding that the past threat indicates a future threat. None of the factors that made the past threat possible have measurably changed; Harder still has the same access to vulnerable people that he had before 2011, as well as the same authority and reputational power.
- Conference leaders invoke differences between past and current policies to preserve a spirit of secrecy.
- Church leaders' ongoing choices indicate a desire to be done with having to hold the complexity that arises when someone as widely appreciated as Harder is found to have been abusive.
- Harder's sexual misconduct history appears to have been concealed, minimized, or discounted when he has sought pastoral and church-related appointments. He continues to serve in multiple settings that put him into regular contact with people from the same demographic categories as his chosen target in 2011.
- By treating Harder's abuse history with secrecy and minimization, Harder's professional peers and denominational supervisors disregard not only Harder's potential to abuse further, but also the spiritual harm that is done by deception.
- Spread over multiple communities, the cost of such deception is high: fractured relationships, institutional betrayal trauma, interpersonal trauma reenactments, immature spirituality, and a widespread resistance to holding difficult and complicated truths while rushing towards “closure” and “moving on.”
- These ongoing effects are likely to operate as a deterrent to reporting for any other person who might have experienced similar behaviors from Harder, or from other WDC perpetrators with similar social power.

### **Works Cited**

Garland, Diana & Argueta, Christen. (2010). How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens: A Qualitative Study of First-Hand Accounts. *Social Work & Christianity*. 37.

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