

Loving Truth and Peace

Mental Health Professionals and Corruption in the Church-Mission Community

Kelly O'Donnell, PsyD and Michèle Lewis O'Donnell, PsyD

CAPS Conference, Pasadena, California USA, 10-12 March 2016

*The only thing necessary for corruption to flourish
is to do nothing about it—or to do some non-efficacious and non-resolute “thing”
and then move on, often with our consciences placated and our livelihoods protected.*

K. and M. O'Donnell, *Loving Truth and Peace* (2013)



Corruption is more complicated—and closer to home—than we may realize. How can we as mental health professionals (MHPs) whose faith-based values help shape and support our professional work, deal with this devastating menace? How can we leverage our skills, character strengths, and relationships in order to help prevent and confront corruption in all its forms within the church-mission community (CMC) and beyond, including in our own lives?

For the last 10 years we have been active in partnering to confront corruption and to promote transparency--accountability for good practice. We have emphasized **cultivating skills and integrity plus loving truth and peace** (Ps. 78:72; Zech. 8:19) as being essential qualities for dealing with corruption at all levels: individual, institutional, and international. It has not been easy nor without its detractors.



Corruption is a ubiquitous, growing reality in our troubled world. One estimate cites over one trillion US dollars lost each year as a direct result of corruption that affects developing countries (One, 2014). We define corruption as **the abuse of entrusted power/public position in order to exploit vulnerable people for private/personal gain**. Adding to and perpetuating the damage is a self-preserving complicity, often permeated with good sounding reasons, by those not willing to resolutely confront it.

The poor are particularly vulnerable and ultimately suffer the most, as resources (including money) that are designated to benefit them directly or indirectly get diverted (EXPOSED Campaign, 2015). No sector is immune to corruption's far-reaching tentacles, including the church-mission community (CMC). "Affinity groups" such as those in CMC settings (churches, mission agencies) are permeated with mutual trust, and hence have the potential for heightened vulnerability and exploitation, as many recent cases demonstrate (Church and Synagogue Security News, 2015). *Sunday they pray...then Monday they prey.*

Johnson et al. (2015) estimate that, within the global church, **US\$50 billion is stolen annually through “ecclesiastical crime,” a figure exceeding their estimate of US\$45 billion in income for “global foreign missions.”** The humanitarian sector faces similar struggles as “Many humanitarian workers have a narrow view of what constitutes corruption, seeing it primarily as a financial issue, rather than abuse of power... nepotism/cronyism, sexual exploitation and abuse, coercion and intimidation of humanitarian staff or aid recipients for personal, social or political gain,...” (Transparency International, 2008, pp. 2-3)

Fortunately, there are a growing number of efforts to confront corruption at all levels of society. For example, recent years has seen a steady stream of good practice commitments, educational materials, and guidelines for financial management from the business, humanitarian, government, and CMC sectors. (e.g., Batchelor & Osei-Mensah; CHS Alliance, 2015; PETRA People 2016, UN Global Compact, 2016)

MHPs: Education, Advocacy, Research, Therapy

MHPs can have an important role to play in educating themselves and the public about the realities and dynamics of corruption. For example, understanding our own human propensities to self-justify and bend the “rules” to our own advantage, along with a psychological-theological understanding of self-deception, are important areas that can be addressed and further researched as corruption precursors. Some of the other psychological and relational dynamics that foment corruption include cognitive dissonance, overly positive self-attributions, confirmation bias, selective perception, bystander effect, group think, affinity group trust, sociopathy, greed, limited/fatigued empathy, ethical sub-standards, misinformation/disinformation, and leadership hubris. (e.g., Bennis *et al.*, 2007; Tavis & Aronson, 2007)

Some of the therapeutic issues when providing support to victims of corruption can be shame and humiliation, generalized relational distrust, depression and anger, and existential doubts and confusion. The dynamics overlap with other types of abuse: Why me? Guilt, shame, foolishness; forgiveness vs accountability vs vengeance; disillusionment, questions about God/existential beliefs; trusting others; practical issues for recovery and taking action—legal, financial, relational, occupational; and personal ethics, strengths, and resilience. **In our personal lives and professional work, we have found it helpful to understand corruption as a core part of evil, and its opposite, integrity, as the main tool to fight it.**

References

- Batchelor, P. & Osei-Mensah, S. (2011). Salt and light: Christians' role in combating corruption. *The Lausanne Global Conversation*. Retrieved from: <http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/conversations/detail/12129>.
- Bennis, W., Coleman, D., O'Toole, J., & Biederman, P. (2008). *Transparency: How leaders create a culture of candor*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- CHS Alliance. (2015). How can we curb corruption in humanitarian operations? *Humanitarian accountability report* (pp. 72-81). Geneva: Author. <http://www.chsalliance.org/resources/publications/har>
- Church and Synagogue Security News, 2015. Retrieved from: <http://blog.congregationalsecurityinc.com/>
- EXPOSED Campaign. (2014). *Grace's corruption story*. [Video]. Retrieved from: <http://exposedcampaign.com/video>
- Johnson, T., Zurlo, G., Hickman, A., & Crossing, P. Christianity 2015: Religious diversity and personal contact. *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 37(1), 28-29. <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/issues/2015-01/2015-01-028-johnson.pdf>
- O'Donnell, K. & Lewis O'Donnell, M. (2013). Loving truth and peace: A case study of family resilience in dealing with mission/aid corruption. In J. Bonk, (Ed.) *Family accountability in missions: Korean and Western case studies* (pp. 175-186). New Haven, CT: OMSC Publications.
- One. (2014). Trillion dollar scandal. Retrieved from: <http://www.one.org/international/policy/trillion-dollar-scandal/>
- PETRA People Network. (2015). *Promoting peace, accountability, and transparency*. [Weblog]. <http://www.petranetwork.blogspot.com/>
- Tavis, C. & Aronson, E. (2007). *Mistakes were made (but not by me); Why we justify foolish beliefs, bad decisions, and hurtful acts*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.
- Transparency International, Humanitarian Policy Group, Feinstein International Center (2008). *Preventing corruption in humanitarian assistance: Final research report*. Retrieved from: <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/1836.pdf>
- United Nations Global Compact. (2015). The ten principles. Retrieved from: <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/mission/principles>