

The Fall of the Gateway Empire and the Disgrace of its Emperor: The Robert Morris Scandal

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Abstract: On June 14, 2024, the Wartburg Watch broke a story that would take down the Gateway Church empire and disgrace its emperor. Independent journalist Dee Parsons with the Wartburg Watch interviewed and wrote about Cindy Clemshire's account of child sexual contact with Gateway Church's founding and lead pastor Robert Morris beginning when she was 12 years old and lasting until she was 16 years old. In response to this uncontested account, Morris resigned, and the Gateway Church leadership accepted his resignation. This case study examines media and online communication from independent journalists, Christian news, local news, and national news to better understand stakeholder relations, public moral outrage, and crisis communication responses to the scandal. Analysis layers image repair, sticky crisis, and renewal frameworks to unpack the complexities of moral and organizational failures. Conclusions focus on the context of sticky crisis communication, the incompleteness of image strategies, and the challenges of faith-based organizational renewal following scandals.

Keywords — Scandal, Crisis, Moral Outrage, Image Repair, Renewal, Faith-based Organizations

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INTRODUCTION

On June 14, 2024, the Wartburg Watch broke a story that would take down the Gateway Church empire and disgrace its emperor, Robert Morris. Run by independent journalist Dee Parsons, the Wartburg Watch featured an interview with Cindy Clemshire and her account of child sexual contact with Gateway Church's founding and lead pastor Robert Morris beginning when Clemshire was 12 years old and Morris was 19 years old, thus precluding Clemshire's ability to consent. The story headlined news organizations across the spectrum from local news to national news, from corporate news to independent news, and from secular news to Christian news. Gateway Church, a mega-church with multiple sites and ministries, faced an onslaught of public hostility. This case study is especially timely given that such scandals in faith-based organizations undermine the trust placed in clergy or pastors to lead churches and their relationship with organizational and community members. In Gallup Poll's last survey studying occupational trust, clergy in the US dropped 6% points while remaining net positive as a trustworthy profession [1]. Preventing scandal and restoring trust in clergy is compromised when figures like Morris commit sexual crimes or misconduct.

This case study examines media and online communication to better understand stakeholder relations, public moral outrage, and crisis communication responses to the Robert Morris scandal. Analysis layers image repair, sticky crisis, and renewal frameworks to unpack the complexities of moral and organizational failures of Morris and Gateway Church. Finally, the conclusion focuses on the context of sticky crisis communication, the incompleteness of image strategies, and the challenges of faith-based organizational renewal following scandals. Recommendations include churches to take preventive action and plan for crisis communication for scandals involving clergy.

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CRISIS COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORKS

When defining crisis in light of the Robert Morris case study, attention turns to several related terms. A crisis by nature is a surprise event that threatens standard organizational practices and/or reputation and demands immediate and effective organizational response [2]. While a crisis is an opportunity for renewal, renewal is affected by the nature of the crisis, attributions of responsibility, operational and public relations responses, and more. Coombs and Tachkova [3] elucidate types of crises that have high moral outrage – scansis and sticky crises. According to Coombs and Tachkova [3] scandals occur when there has been a moral, ethical, or inappropriate behavior that attracts media coverage heightening public awareness and outrage at the violation. Not all crises are scandals, but when a crisis and a scandal merge, a scansis occurs. A scansis is typified by high, public moral outrage that erodes short-term benefits of many traditional rhetorical strategies to crises. Additionally, a scansis remaining in the public sphere, continuing to damage the organization's operations and reputation long after the incident is also a sticky crisis. These terms are especially apropos to the Robert Morris case because Morris, Gateway Church, and stakeholders have remained hot topics of news and are embroiled in an ongoing set of court cases, ministry resignations, and organizational downsizing continuing to threaten organizational response and renewal.

In sticky crises, layering image repair and renewal frameworks is advantageous because scansis producing moral outrage pose complex, interrelated challenges to both reputation and renewal. Layering several crisis communication frameworks to understand, analyze, and learn from the Robert Morris scandal, this study draws on image repair, sticky crisis, and renewal bodies of research. To begin, image repair has advanced the study of crisis communication with an emphasis on how individuals, organizations, and stakeholders communicate responsibility, apologies, and image repair in the wake of a crisis [4]. Benoit [4, 5] and colleagues have identified communication strategies used more or less effectively in response to a wide range of crisis including denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification, with denial, evasion of responsibility, and reducing offensiveness being poorly perceived when responsibility is attributed to the individual or organization employing those rhetorical strategies. Crisis renewal frameworks feature rhetorical and organizational strategies including learning from failure, ethical communication, prospective vision, and effective rhetoric [6]. While image repair focuses on public perceptions of individuals and organizations tainted by reputational crises, renewal focuses on how individuals and organizations move forward, learning from the crisis. Thus, three interrelated research questions drive this case study: a) what characteristics of the Robert Morris case make this a scansis and sticky crisis, b) what short-term rhetorical and organizational strategies are used to reduce image threats, and c) what renewal strategies are used to address long-term reputational and operational renewal?

METHODS

To build a case study of the Robert Morris and Gateway church crisis, we drew on content posted by independent and traditional journalists, Christian and secular news, and organizational websites. Christian news included independent journalists working for Christian blogs like the Wartburg Watch and the Roys Report and traditional journalists working for Christian news organizations like *Christianity Today* and the *Christian Post*. Additionally, traditional, secular national and regional news sources were used like the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, the *Texas Tribune*, the *Dallas Morning News*, and local news sites for ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX. Websites were also monitored with statements collected by Gateway Church and related ministries. Given our interest in the strategic rhetorical choices by Morris, his victim, Gateway Church, and other stakeholders, we collected data from the time the Wartburg Watch broke the story on June 14, 2024 through the time of this publication by using the search terms Morris, Clemshire, and Gateway Church and monitoring media. Because this is a sticky crisis, we continue to collect data, understanding that a limitation of this research is that the long-term nature of this sticky crisis exceeds the timing of this publication. Data was first organized into a narrative of the case identifying a chronology, set of characters, scenes, and actions. After that initial stage, data was coded for image repair and renewal strategies.

RESULTS

The Christian independent journalist, Dee Parsons, runs the blog the Wartburg Watch, which is a site designed to publish stories about Christian churches and their leadership's wrongdoings as a means of holding these organizations publicly accountable. On June 14, 2024, Parsons published an expose on Gateway Church founder Robert Morris [7]. The expose relied heavily on the firsthand account of sexual abuse accuser, Cindy Clemshire, but the expose also depended on other primary and secondary sources to verify the facts of Clemshire's account. The account outlined how Robert Morris began sexually abusing Clemshire when she was 12 and he was 21, continuing the abuse as he, his wife, and young child visited the home on and off again from 1982-1987 during Morris' time as a traveling evangelist. Although there is a public record of Morris admitting to an inappropriate sexual relationship with a young lady when he was in his young 20's and justifying his return to ministry by sitting out for a period of two-years following the confession, Morris evaded responsibility for his actions and has never fully disclosed his transgression publicly. Following the expose and media frenzy, Morris chose to step out of the limelight with his ministry webpages going dark, Gateway Church erasing him from its "about" and "history" sections of the website, and radio and television media pulling all his programming. The following results discuss the findings related to the scansis, image repair strategies, and crisis renewal strategies.

SCANSIS AND STICKY CRISIS CASE

Building the case narrative demonstrated that the Robert Morris and Gateway Church crisis met the criteria for a scansis and sticky crisis, but it is unclear if those directly involved in the case understood the long-term implications of this type of crisis or the number of stakeholders that would be affected by the crisis. The story of sexual abuse broke on June 24, 2024, but the story remains in headlines as Gateway Church experienced the fallout including a 35-40% reduction in tithes and offerings and indictment of Morris in Oklahoma for child sexual abuse [8]. As the next two sub-sections layout, image repair and renewal strategies necessitated a long-term approach consistent with the longevity of scansis and sticky crises [3].

IMAGE REPAIR STRATEGIES

In terms of image repair strategies, Morris historically evaded responsibility for his sexual misconduct and child molestation of Clemshire by using a repetitive euphemism to differentiate his behavior from molestation and minimize its illegality by calling it an “inappropriate sexual” or “extramarital relationship” with a “young lady.” The strategically ambiguous language was not publicly questioned, and Morris was able to hide his wrongdoing for decades by controlling the narrative of the misconduct. As previous ministry leaders have revealed, Morris did not offer details of the incident when mentioning it, often counter blamed the victim describing her as “flirtatious,” and never disclosed the “young lady’s” age. However, his narrative control unraveled when Clemshire went public with her story on June 14, 2024. The evasion of responsibility, differentiation, and minimization strategies failed. Because Morris disappeared from the public after releasing a brief statement and made no further effort to repair his image, the narrative was largely dictated by stakeholders, including media, slowly piecing together how a mega-church pastor, author, and radio host with an estimated net worth of \$117 million could have committed the crime of child molestation without any consequences for decades.

Image repair strategies were also employed by Gateway Church, but unlike Morris, Gateway Church could not disappear from the public, subsequently employing a myriad of strategies overtime to address threats to organizational image and operations. Initially, Gateway Church elders used denial claiming that they had not known any details of Morris’ admission of an inappropriate sexual relationship with a young lady in the 1980’s; however, this rhetorical strategy was short-lived. Four days after the expose, Gateway Church accepted the resignation of Morris to socially distance themselves from Morris. Social distance was a poor fit for the moral outrage and the close ties between the church and its founder, Morris. However, at the same time of the resignation acceptance, Gateway Church announced it hired a law firm to investigate the allegations and the church’s role in concealing Morris’ conduct. Rhetorical strategies shifted quickly. Corrective actions trickled out over the following months with leaves of absence, firings, and organizational changes announced as did Gateway Church’s admission of responsibility as the investigation revealed a portion of elders had learned of the sexual abuse years earlier through email and Morris refusal to compensate Clemshire fully for counseling and request that she sign a non-disclosure agreement.

Because of Morris’ celebrity-like status and Gateway Church’s size, many stakeholders were affected by this scansis and employed image repair strategies. For example, Morris’ son and daughter-in-law were employed by Gateway Church, took leave of absences, and a few months later announced they were starting a new church choosing to distance themselves from Morris and avoid direct references to the scandal. Many ministry leaders communicated their ignorance of Morris’ behavior like James Robison, who denied claims he knew of Morris’ child sex abuse and that he restored him to ministry following the abuse.

CRISIS RENEWAL STRATEGIES

Renewal seems unlikely for Morris, who is facing indictment in Oklahoma for child sexual charges and is in litigation related to Gateway Church and retirement funding. However, Gateway Church and many related stakeholders have employed - to varying degrees – renewal strategies. Focusing on Gateway Church, the organization sought to a) learn from their failures by submitting to an in-depth investigation of their role in the scandal and cover-up, b) communicate ethically about the scansis by publicly commenting on new developments in the case, taking responsibility for their role in the cover up, and expressing empathy for the victim and her family, c) articulate a prospective vision for the slightly downsized church by searching for a new lead pastor, hiring two interim pastors, and focusing internal communication with members, and d) using effective rhetoric to communicate mortification, corrective action, and responsibility. Nevertheless, renewal has been hampered as the organization persists in social distancing themselves from Morris to the extent that they have erased Morris from the organization’s historical narrative online and as the organization has experienced a series of linked crises such as litigation over the “money back guarantee” tithing scheme implemented by Morris. Gateway Church cannot undo its past tainted by its founder and its elders that enabled Morris to cover up his transgressions. Ongoing crises stem from this past, and church and community members have been impacted by these breaches of trust. While current elders seem committed to ethical communication, the church’s public facing communication, such as its website, demonstrate an organization struggling to communicate about its past as it renews.

DISCUSSION

Given the results of the case study, four overriding concerns emerge for churches facing scansis. At the crux of these four concerns is the need for crisis preparedness. First, churches need to be trained in crisis communication and renewal strategies to better understand the effects of their rhetoric on stakeholders and organizational image and operations. Second, churches need a set of risk mitigation practices in place to prevent misconduct and to respond ethically and immediately to misconduct. Simply having a Ministry Safe training or background checks for leaders is insufficient. Third, churches who

experience misconduct crises need to integrate the crisis into their history to communicate how they have learned from it rather than erasing it. Fourth, churches need to reduce the authoritarian, blind trust placed in leaders by critically examining the effects of celebrity-pastor culture on their church and secular influences.

CONCLUSION

Despite the breaking of the Robert Morris story on June 14, 2024, this case spans five decades beginning with Morris' alleged abuse in 1982 and continues at present with pending court cases, ministry resignations, and organizational downsizing. The protesters holding up signs reading, "She was only 12," outside Gateway Church services on June 28, 2024 were the tip of the iceberg of public, moral outrage. While Gateway Church has focused on internal stakeholders (e.g. membership and leaders), the organization continues to downsize reducing worship services, ministries, and staff. Morris has been indicted in Oklahoma for sexual abuse of Clemshire, and Clemshire's story is affecting legislation in Texas related to non-disclosure agreements and sexual abuse. In particular, this case highlights the role of independent media (e.g. Wartburg Watch and the Roys Report) in breaking scandals and providing information to the public during such crises. Furthermore, this case illustrates the limitations of corrective action and mortification in sticky crises. Organizations must consider the depth and breadth of a crisis and act more swiftly to uncover their culpability. Gateway Church failed to do so initially by accepting Morris' resignation. A scansis like this does not occur in a vacuum, and Morris' moral failure is among a host of other moral failures of evangelical leaders in the news. Religious organizations like Gateway Church must take the short- and long-term approach to managing crisis and renewal understanding that the broader context of church scandals affect trust in their organization and that their own scandals further contribute to public perceptions of clergy's trustworthiness.

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