



C h a p t e r O n e

ELEPHANTS

When asked to write this book, I remembered my first personal encounter with a live elephant. I was in second grade and asked to sit atop a husky elephant at the Memphis Zoo. While exciting and scary for me, this was also a photo opportunity for members of the Republican Party. A Memphis newspaper, *The Commercial Appeal*, ran a picture of my hanging on to the pachyderm with grave intensity. The elephant did not feel like what I had imagined. Its skin was oily, almost tender, and its hide was prickly, like the stubble of a beard. I was fascinated with the sheer size and height of this commanding creature. How could anyone overlook seeing that elephant!

Yet, in twenty-five years of teaching in theological institutions, I know it is common to overlook an elephant in the room. By this I do not mean an animal like the one I rode in second grade. I mean an IMMENSE issue or COLOSSAL conflict that is avoided, ignored, or overlooked. I mean a concern that is huge or elephantine. An “elephant in the room” is “metaphorically evocative of any object or matter of which everyone

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is definitely aware and yet no one is willing to publicly acknowledge.”¹ It is to ignore, conceal, deny, hide, or avoid the obvious.

The topic of “elephants” or unnamed issues in the church did not initially evoke within me a positive response. However, when I considered the amount of damage an unrestrained elephant could unleash in a church, I had to reconsider. If provoked or unattended, an elephant can crush things of value and soil our gathering places. Our finely trained seminarians can be endangered in their ministries by collusions and conspiracies to deny or to conceal elephants in the churches. It is for reasons of their safety that I agreed to co-write this book. Interestingly, when I mentioned this writing project to a roomful of theological students at Perkins School of Theology, each student came forth with numerous examples of hidden dangers in ministry. Most of these students are already serving in churches. They have experienced firsthand the dysfunctional ecclesiastical spaces where blindfolds are worn and where blind spots are standard. These students know that a healthy pastor is an endangered species. The drop-out rate and the burn-out rate among ministers has been of concern to all denominations. It is of vital concern to me. Ministers are at great risk for compassion fatigue, an overextension of themselves in their life of service and in their acts of mercy. Often, ministers are expected to do too much and are like lifeguards at a community pool: “Lifeguards take regular breaks, change their viewing stations repeatedly during shifts, and take many other steps to maintain their vigilance, but vigilance, besides being subject to its own limitations, cannot eliminate *inattentional blindness* [emphasis mine]. The lifeguards simply cannot see everything, but the illusion of attention makes us believe

they will.”² A minister cannot see or foresee everything. Inattention to elephants in the room often results in a trampling of the minister underfoot—by accident or by design. Although bush and forest elephants are considered endangered species,³ that is not the focus of this book. Rather, the focus is on those serving Christ and the church and their imperiled longevity.

The Rat and the Elephant (Adapted from Aesop’s Fables)

There was once a rat who sauntered down the road. Suddenly, his vision was blocked by the sight of a lumbering elephant and his entourage. This coterie of admirers included the “royal family” and attendants, a favorite cat and dog, a parrot, and a monkey. Behind these came a group of followers. They blocked the rat’s progress. “What fools you are to be devoted to an elephant,” the rat blubbered. “Is it his size or bulk that impresses you? That weight will frighten some little boys and girls! I can frighten people, too. I have two eyes, two ears, and four legs like that elephant whom you adore! That elephant has no right to monopolize the highway!” The rat’s loud protest drew the attention of the cat. She eyed the rat for a moment, then jumped to the ground, and swiftly showed the rat that he was no elephant.

Many of us have entered an institution where the “presence” of a revered predecessor looms heavily in the halls, the office, the sanctuary, the fellowship hall. The legacy is larger than life and is comparable to the elephant and his entourage in this fable. The predecessor is like a “heavyweight” in the ring of service: the sermons were the most substantial; the bedside manner was life changing; the theology was solid; the building renovations are massive. The successes are frequently

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recounted with pride. In some denominations, previous pastors are allowed to visit the former congregation/parish. In others, revisiting is discouraged if not prohibited. In this latter case, nevertheless, the “living legend” can still impose his or her presence on the incoming pastor or priest or rabbi.

Rachel knew she was in trouble. She was fifty-two, in a second career, well trained in a prominent theological institution, and totally unprepared for the “apparition” in her first full-time appointment. Now, Rachel had been an outstanding student, earning a preaching award at graduation. Her first career was in communications; she was an able speaker. She was biblically grounded, theologically astute, and trained in conflict resolution. She was an A student in all her pastoral care courses. However, theological education did not prepare her for the imposing presence of her predecessor, Rev. Wayne Bright, now in early retirement in an assisted living facility near Crossroads United Methodist (UMC), a small-town church. Rev. Bright had suffered a massive heart attack and currently resided with his devoted wife in Shady Grove Retirement Village. Some longtime parishioners, speaking with a reverent lilt in their voices, were convinced that dear Rev. Bright had so loved their church, that it almost killed him!

Unless it was a new member or a new family, Rev. Bright was always requested for weddings, funerals, and baptisms of grandchildren. Rachel assisted, of course, but the longtime congregants wanted dear Rev. Bright. He and Mrs. Bright attended church almost every Sunday, and the congregation clustered around them at the coffee hour. It also followed that before surgeries and after accidents, the established members wanted the prayers of Rev. Bright. Rachel felt that the road to

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her ministry was blocked by Rev. Bright's imposing entourage and admirers. He was like the elephant in Aesop's fable. Rachel knew that to challenge this dotage on Rev. Bright would result in a counterattack, as the cat pounced on the rat.

She was not Rev. Bright. She knew her greatest gift was in preaching. The content and application of her sermons were well received. Even so, she overheard criticisms of her delivery: she left the pulpit and "wandered" around the chancel. Rachel used a narrative style that was unfamiliar, given Rev. Bright's three-point, deductive sermons. If her strength in preaching was not appreciated, what chance did she have to succeed with the elephantine specter of Rev. Bright that lumbered around the church?

Rachel began to research the history of this local UMC church. Fortunately, as in most churches, there was a resident historian. There were church records in the library, but the oral history proved equally significant. The church had suffered a great tragedy in Rev. Bright's time of leadership; Bright had been reappointed to this congregation by the bishop after the accident. The youth of the church were on a mission trip to Mexico and were staying with a UMC congregation near the U.S./Mexican border. The young people were staying in the church gym when one teenager swung from the basketball goal. The heavy upright goal toppled and fell onto the chest of the teenager. He died later that night in the hospital. This incident became a permanent scar in the life of this church. The youth group disbanded. The entire congregation was enveloped in a profound grief. Rev. Bright saw them through the rawest stages of pain. He suffered alongside as a good pastor would. He was part of their recovery and of a past they shared.

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Rachel decided to enter this past. She essentially repositioned herself to be “at the head of the procession.” The new family center was soon to be five years old. Rachel initiated a potluck supper in honor of the building’s anniversary with Rev. and Mrs. Bright as special guests. The resident historian of Crossroads UMC was invited to give a history of the building of the center. This included mention of the tragic accident, which resulted in the memorial gifting of funds and programs for this new building. Working with the elders and the Brights, Rachel proposed a summer camp for local youth and enlisted the aid of the leaders in her parish. The camp would be named in memory of their “lost son.” In this way, Rachel stepped into the prolonged parade of grief in that church and pointed in a new direction. If we refer to Aesop’s fable, the rat now leads the caravan of elephant, attendants, and admirers in a new and healthier direction. As a postscript, when Rachel was eventually appointed by the bishop to another church, Crossroads UMC lamented the loss of Rachel so greatly that they have elevated her to the position of a saint!

The Lion, Jupiter, and the Elephant (Adapted from Aesop’s Fables)

Elephants from the past come in so many guises. In Rachel’s story, it was a revered predecessor. The congregation used two psychological processes to elevate this minister: idealization and idolization. Idealization is the exclusive selection of positive attributes and affirming memories; these attributes and memories are the only lens through which a person or situation is viewed. Idolization is the exaltation of a person, issue, or party to the point of worship.

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Elephants from the pastor's past can also roam the rooms of the church. For example, a brutal divorce, an extramarital affair, or a suspicion of inappropriate sexual activity can result in silence and denial. In his book *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life*,⁴ sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel describes the role of the closemouthed bystanders, who by their very silence enable the denial. Meta-denial is the denial of the denial.⁵ This can happen to the individual, to the congregation, or to a group within the congregation. Silence then becomes a source of fear.⁶ When an elephant is surrounded by expressed or suppressed fear, even the tiniest gnat can undo it.

In Aesop's *The Lion, Jupiter, and the Elephant*, the lion is complaining to the god Jupiter that he, the stout lion, is frightened by the crowing of a cock. Although the lion is handsome, strong, and powerful, he is bothered by this one fear. Jupiter is not sympathetic and recounts all the marvelous attributes that he had given the lion. Shortly thereafter, the lion encounters an elephant. The elephant is constantly shaking his head and ears. His ears move with a tremor. Just at that moment, the lion spots a gnat on the head of the elephant. The elephant confesses: "Do you see that tiny gnat? If it enters my ear, my fate is sealed, and I shall die!" The lion reflects on this predicament and concludes, "If such a huge beast is terrified of a gnat, I'll stop complaining. I am better off than the elephant!"

Flute

Denial of an elephant in the church and silence surrounding it can create a precarious situation. Pastor Richard Leifker was appointed to a church that had a history of unhealthy interpersonal boundaries. The church had never dealt with pre-

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vious innuendos of impropriety and inappropriate behavior. Pastor Leifker was still in theological training when he asked for help with the following situation:

A three-year-old girl named Tammy goes to preschool in a Methodist church. Tammy is an only child. Preschool is Wednesdays and Fridays from 8:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. At 9:30 on Wednesdays, the children go to a 30-minute chapel time. They wear a blue uniform shirt on their chapel days. Pastor Richard is not leading the children in chapel on this particular chapel day. He arrives at church just after the service.

After chapel on this particular day, the children go into the large room across from the pastor's office, where "Ernie the music man" has brought in musical instruments of every kind for the children to play. Tammy secures the flute to play because she has one at home and knows how to "play" it. Evidently, she goes over near the pastor's door to play so he will hear it. The church is filled with the "music" of drums, horns, guitars, etc.

On Friday, Tammy's mother decides to have Tammy wear the blue uniform shirt to preschool. The child objects to the shirt. She says she does not want to go to chapel. (Note: the shirt and chapel are associated with one another.) Mother gets another shirt.

Between Friday and Monday, Tammy and her mother talk. Tammy's mother hears her say, "Pastor hurt me with the red flute." Tammy's mother does not question any further, but she goes to the school on Tuesday. (Note: school is closed on Monday.) She talks to the director of the preschool. Again, the mother says she believes the child told her, "The pastor hurt me with the red flute." Pastor Richard is notified. A meeting is called.

At this point, Pastor Richard confided in me this chain of events. As open communication took place and as events were reconstructed, it was clear that Tammy had said, “The pastor heard me with the red flute.” Pastor Richard continued to maintain clear and firm boundaries as he had always done. In this case and in all churches, knowledge of the past history of the congregation is vital, lest a “gnat” of gossip or misunderstanding seal the fate of the church or the minister.

All Creatures, Great and Small

An elephant is one of the greater, or larger, creatures that God has made. An elephant is not an evil animal. In fact, many of us were raised on children’s stories featuring kind and talented elephants. One popular narrative features Dumbo, who is ridiculed from birth because he has such large and floppy ears. In the circus, his mother tries to protect him from bullying and teasing, but she is soon separated from him. One friend, Timothy, remains faithful to little Dumbo. They accidentally drink champagne one evening, become inebriated, and wake up in a tree. It is discovered that Dumbo has flown them there! When Dumbo’s aerial arts are discovered by the circus owners, he becomes the star attraction. Kind Dumbo forgives all his former tormentors and is reunited with his mother. What child cannot identify with the need for protection and acceptance?

In 1931, Jean de Brunhoff introduced a winsome and orphaned baby elephant named Babar in *The Story of Babar*. After Babar ran away from the hunter who killed his mother, he came upon a town. Babar showed courage in maneuvering his way through town and skill in adapting to clothes,

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friendships, and language. Eventually, Babar left the city to return to the forest, where he was elected king of the elephants. Subsequent adventures of Babar were written by de Brunhoff and his son, Laurent, but were always illustrated with Babar in a bright green suit and a bowler hat, accoutrements that brought a smile to young readers.

Elephants come in many shapes and sizes, but whether weighing seven tons (African elephant) or six tons (Asian elephant), they are the largest of the living land mammals. They are feared and revered. They have been used in warfare; Hannibal used them to defeat the Romans in 219 BC on the banks of the Trebia River. They have been used in entertainment, particularly as circus performers and beasts of burden. In 1882, P. T. Barnum bought an elephant named Jumbo from the London Zoo; Jumbo was a famous attraction until his untimely death. He was mourned worldwide.

An elephant is a complicated creature. Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants*⁷ develops this intricate makeup in the character of Rosie, an elephant in the Benzini Brothers Circus. Rosie is intelligent, resilient, and capable of devotion. She suffers from a violent owner/trainer. When the violence is turned on her rider, Rosie kills the owner in defense.

Elephants in the church are not physical or fictional animals but rather larger-than-life issues that loom in our midst. They can be as varied and as complex as the fictional (Dumbo) and actual (Jumbo). Elephants can be innocuous; they can be entertaining; they can be deadly. In the church, they can be used in warfare. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate how to identify elephants in the church and to lead them out of the sacred space. To do this, you will become an "elephant rider,"