



The Prevention Of Clergy Sexual Misconduct

Clergy sexual misconduct has not reached epidemic proportions, but most experts agree that the number of incidents is increasing. Reliable research over the past 15 years concludes that about 10 to 12 percent of ministers have engaged in sexual intercourse with members of their congregation, and about 25 to 35 percent of clergymen have admitted to sexually inappropriate behavior with parishioners.¹

If sexual misconduct by the clergy is so common, and if virtually all ministers are tempted to sin sexually, what can be done to prevent this destructive behavior? Why do some ministers fall and others do not? Are there preventative measures that can help ministers and churches nip in the bud this breach of power and trust?

A better approach for preventing clergy sexual misconduct is to equip ministers and churches to understand negative influences and encourage positive resistance. Clergy and churches must refuse to succumb to the demons of denial, ignorance, and minimization, which usually foster secrecy and collusion. Research indicates that ministers who withstand sexual temptation understand their own personal susceptibility, recognize the danger signals, and build strong support systems. Churches assist in prevention by perceiving the dynamics of the clergy role, encouraging methods of accountability for its ministers, and developing wise policies.

Personal Awareness

For perpetrators, victims, and colluders, the first step in the prevention of clergy abuse is a personal recognition of the actual problem.

Awareness of the dynamics of clergy sexual abuse is basic to all other prevention strategies. Every minister needs to realize that he is at risk to cross the boundary into the forbidden zone every day. The male pastor is not exempt from sexual attraction to congregants. He must be aware of his feelings and honestly acknowledge the sexual urges he senses.

In addition, as a professional caregiver, the minister is a special target for sexual failure. Some ministers have difficulty accepting their limitations, especially in counseling members of the opposite gender. Pastors who see themselves as rescuers may create a codependent relationship that is dangerous. A rescuer-healer minister is susceptible to sexual failure because he may cross over healthy boundaries to fulfill his own personal needs.²

A minister must be aware of personal susceptibilities which make him more prone toward sexual abuse. Deep-seated insecurities, which easily surface as sexual and power needs, often fuel misconduct. Unresolved questions relating to a pastor's own sexuality, especially destructive experiences from the past, can contribute to the exploitation of others. Sexual addiction is a critical influence upon some abusers.

What positive lessons can be learned from this summary of significant factors related to clergy sexual misconduct? First, ministers inclined to harass or abuse urgently need personal therapy. For them, the personal and professional risk of ministering to women is too great.

For pastors who do not sense a vulnerability toward abusing parishioners, but who do recognize the reality of sexual temptation, the dynamics of the pastor/congregant relationship may offer another lesson. Peter

Rutter observes, “Every forbidden-zone relationship in which sexual tension appears also presents an opportunity to heal.”³ The male minister holds the power to move the arousal of sexual feelings beyond temptation into an opportunity for the healing of deeper wounds. He alone can turn an impending disaster into a life-giving moment.

Warning Signs

Knowing the warning signs of clergy sexual abuse can aid the prevention of it. Lebacqz and Barton insist that ministers should be aware of their boundaries and always seek to maintain those borders. “Even if the boundaries for sexual intimacy are the same for pastor and layperson, the responsibility for maintaining those boundaries fall to the professional person.”⁴

Ministers need a “warning system” that will alert them when they are approaching unacceptable levels of intimacy with parishioners. Lebacqz and Barton have proposed a checklist of signals that warn ministers when they are headed for trouble:

- the “publicity” test: what would others think?
- physical arousal — one’s own or the other’s;
- inordinate sexual fantasy;
- sexual gestures or body language;
- intuition, instinct, or not feeling right;
- wanting to share intimacies that are not called for;
- a parishioner wanting too much time or attention;
- wanting to shift the focus to a sexual subject.⁵

Marie Fortune has developed a list of questions which pose the possibility of sexual misconduct: Is the minister doing a lot of counseling beyond his or her scope of responsibility? Is the person not taking care of himself or herself, canceling vacations, neglecting time with family? Does the person tend to sexualize conversations? Are mechanisms of accountability being ignored? Is lay leadership discouraged? Does everything in the church focus on the pastor?⁶

The vulnerability of the counseling process has led some to conclude that pastors should not counsel at all or restrict their counseling to the same sex. However, counseling across gender lines is an inevitable part of pastoral ministry. A better approach is to establish some necessary precautions which help prevent sexual misconduct. Guidelines for pastoral counseling usually stress: (1) Always have another person nearby when counseling; (2) Develop a method which prevents total privacy in the counseling office (unlocked door, glass panel, etc.); (3) Publish counseling guidelines; (4) Create a referral list for persons needing long-term counseling; (5) Decide in advance and indicate to counselees how much touching is appropriate.

Grenz and Bell offer six warning signs which indicate boundaries are being violated:

- The conversation becomes increasingly personal, as the pastor talks unduly about himself;
- The pastor’s physical contact has moved beyond greetings to inappropriate pats and hugs;
- The pastor fantasizes about a sexual relationship with the congregant;
- The pastor offers to drive the congregant home;
- The pastor arranges meetings with the congregant outside of the normal counseling time;
- The pastor increasingly hides his feelings for the parishioner and his meetings with her from his accountability systems, especially his wife.⁷

Support Systems

One of the best ways to ensure responsible sexual behavior is for the minister to build strong support systems. Accountability relationships offer a crucial antidote for misconduct.

A wholesome marriage reinforces sexual fidelity. The research of Balswick and Thoburn revealed, “Over one fourth of the pastors cite their relationship with their wife as the most important reason for sexual fidelity.” The study also concluded, “Marital dissatisfaction coupled with work boredom is the kind of situation that has been conducive to the most fantasy and openness to actual liaisons.”⁸

A good marriage provides a wholesome context for sexual expression. It enhances intimacy and facilitates honest communication, while reminding the married church leader that he is accountable.

Colleagues and personal counselors provide another support group. A pastor should not hesitate to seek personal counseling from a qualified therapist when he needs inner healing and emotional health.

An important supportive contribution is made by models and mentors. Many pastors have formed accountability groups who meet regularly to develop trust, offer encouragement, and hold one another morally accountable.

The greatest role model for ministers is Jesus, who ministered to women without moral compromise. He viewed each woman He encountered through God’s eyes, not as objects for selfish gratification, but persons with deep needs and spiritual aspirations. As disciples of Christ, pastors are to minister to women as Jesus did.

—Adapted from *Broken Trust: Confronting Clergy Sexual Misconduct*, Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Endnotes

1. Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter, *Ministerial Ethics: Being a Good Minister in a Not-So-Good World* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 81.
2. Stanley J. Grenz and Roy D. Bell, *Betrayal of Trust: Sexual Misconduct in the Pastorate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 132.
3. Peter Rutter, *Sex in the Forbidden Zone* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1989), 223.
4. Karen Lebacqz and Ronald Barton, *Sex in the Parish* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 107–8.
5. Ibid, 65.
6. Cited by Greg Warner in “With Sexual Misconduct, All Suffer in Blame Game,” Associated Baptist Press, 23 December 1993, 5. See also Marie M. Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred? When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 106,107; 148–153.
7. Grenz and Bell, 145.
8. Balswick and Thoburn, “How Ministers Deal With Sexual Temptation,” *Pastoral Psychology* (1991): 280, 270.