

Application to the church

by Diana R. Garland



People recoil reflexively at the topic of sexual harassment in the church, particularly for those who have never experienced sexual harassment first hand. Surely this can't and doesn't happen, we say to ourselves, and most surely it won't happen in "our" church. Even those who have known it to happen probably have dismissed it as the rare "bad apple" in the pastorate or perhaps a result of the seductive behavior of a woman working closely with an attractive, charismatic male leader. I have heard some male church leaders mutter (though not in print so that I can quote them) that "this" is what you can expect when women are allowed into positions of leadership in the church.

But sexual harassment does happen in our churches and seminaries and church agencies, and when it does, lives are destroyed, marriages are thrown into crisis and often destroyed, and faith in God and in the church is crippled. I have just completed more than 80 interviews with survivors of clergy sexual misconduct, including the primary victims—women and men whose trust in their religious leaders was misused to engage them in sexual relationships—and also spouses and friends whose lives were deeply affected.

The biggest challenge to dealing with this topic is overcoming the denial that it is a problem at all. Sexual harassment doesn't happen in every congregation, or even in most congregations, so perhaps we can just hope for the best and stay focused on the positive aspects of church life. To deny the possibility of it happening in our church,

however, is the very response that deepens the silence and shame of victims when it does occur.

Moreover, "hoping for the best" does not take seriously the brokenness of humanity, not only in the world but also in the church. Christianity is a faith lived in community, not in isolation, and to live in community means to take seriously the ways we can hurt one another as well as build one another up. Jeremiah 6 makes it clear that covering up problems or treating them as superficial when, in fact, they are life threatening calls for God's judgment (Jeremiah 6: 13-15). Sexual harassment is a life-threatening wound to the body of Christ.

What, then, is a church to do? Collins focuses first on awareness training for clergy and better preparation for the counseling role. She suggests clearly defined guidelines and disciplinary measures. Last, she comes to prevention training and education for congregations. Although these are all appropriate and useful, I would flip the order and the emphasis. First, we must begin

with Christian education about sexuality and power dynamics with a much broader brush that focuses on all the places we live as Christians, and within that framework, we can include the church. By doing so, we can avoid that initial recoil that keeps congregations from dealing with this topic. Sexual harassment takes place in workplaces, social gatherings, and schools, as well as churches—very few would deny that. Sexual harassment is not simply a crossing of a personal boundary; it is what Jesus talks

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about as the sin of adultery (Matthew 5:27-28). It is looking at another as an object of self-gratification rather than as a human being worthy of respect and self-sacrifice (Garland & Garland, 2007a, 2007b). In a society that emphasizes individualism and self-actualization over community, adultery is a natural outcome. Therefore, sexual harassment is not just the individual behavior of an errant leader; treating others as objects for self-gratification is tolerated and even supported by the values of our culture. Nevertheless, for Christians, using the power we have in relationships to get what we want from others without regard for their well being is abuse of that power. Beginning with the teachings of scripture about how we are to treat one another as sexual beings gives us a much broader framework for understanding sexual harassment wherever we experience it, and especially in the church.

Instead, let's consider the broader issues that sexual harassment represents—the distortion of sexuality and power. I would flip the order and the emphasis. First, we must begin with Christian education about sexuality and power dynamics. In a society where “looking out for number one” is a virtue, it becomes natural for people to treat one another as a means to their own ends. Adultery—treating another as a sexual object—is a natural outcome. When adulterizing another—treating another as a sexual object—takes place in a relationship of unequal power, however, it crosses the line, even in our culture. It is abuse to use one's power to take sexual advantage of the other. These frameworks of adultery and abuse of power give us a much

broader framework for understanding sexual harassment wherever we experience it, and especially in the church. Consider a study of sexuality and Christian faith, looking at how Jesus addressed these topics. Look at clips of current movies that conflate sex and power for what they teach us about these aspects of human life.

Second, we need to provide resources to help churches learn how to be real communities. One of the startling findings of our research with survivors is that the sexual misconduct almost always began in a public setting. We heard of pastors who hugged too closely and for too long, who held hands with or kissed female parishioners in front of congregation members, who made sexualized comments—and yet no one questioned the behaviors and

comments. Some leaders invited women into the privacy of their offices for “counseling” multiple times a week for months and even years with the full knowledge of other staff members. It isn't just victims who dismissed the errant leaders' actions as benign; others around them evidently did so as well. Perhaps others said to themselves, as did the victims, “I'm just being too sensitive.”

In a real community, when people see behavior that makes them uncomfortable or that raises questions, they speak up. It's like caring enough about a friend to tell them they have spinach stuck in their teeth. People who love one another intervene lovingly in one another's lives—for the sake of the other, not for their own self-interest.

We must recognize that our leaders are human beings. They need delivering from evil, especially the evil they can wreak in the lives of others. That deliverance will not

RESOURCES

Many denominations now have policies on sexual harassment and misconduct. Check with your denominational office. Other resources include:

Faith Trust Institute:

www.faitrustinstitute.org

The Hope of Survivors:

www.thehopeofsurvivors.com

Advocate Web:

www.advocateweb.com

The Nathan Network:

www.nathan-network.org

Tamar's Voice:

www.tamarsvoice.org

Spiritual Abuse Recovery Resource:

www.spiritualabuse.com

come if we allow people to act in ways that can create such great harm, just because we are embarrassed to speak up. We must learn to love one another more than that. Being a community of faith that holds one another accountable is a topic much broader and more inclusive than leaders' sexual harassment, yet we must deal with its reality so that we can ensure that congregations truly can be "sanctuary"—safe places—for all of God's children, including female leaders. Yes, we need to educate our clergy to use their authority compassionately and to understand well the protective nature of professional boundaries.

Educating clergy, however, cannot correct the broader systemic issues of an adulterous society that treats persons like sexual objects, nor can it turn collections of persons into loving communities that look out for one another and intervene lovingly and protectively in one another's lives. Sexual harassment of female clergy is a horrific problem, but it seems on the surface to be a narrow one; proportionately, there just aren't that many female clergy to be

harassed. When placed in the larger context of how we disciple Christians to deal with sexuality and power dynamics in all the relationships and contexts of their lives, we suddenly realize that, yes, this issue affects every congregation, whether we choose to deal with it or not.

REFERENCES

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Diana Garland is Dean of the School of Social Work at Baylor University and the founding director of the Center for Family and Community Ministries. She is the author of *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* (InterVarsity Press) and *Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families* (Jossey Bass). She is currently conducting national research on clergy sexual misconduct with adults.



A Psalm - When God Created Me

O God, it is hard enough to imagine that I actually have a liver, lungs,
and a brain inside of me even when I know the science of it all.

How much more difficult to conceive that I have a soul where You have
forged a place for You to enliven this body, mind, and spirit that is me.

Forgive my inattention to this marvel from time to time and renew a
sense of wonder, much like when as a baby I grabbed my own toes for the
first time and was thrilled with the connectedness of me.

Let me see myself as the miracle You do so that I may be free
to see my neighbors this way too.

by Angela Dennison