



## Silent sufferers: Female clergy sexual abuse

Cutting across race, class, occupational status, and sexual orientation, most sufferers of clergy sexual abuse are thought to be women, though children and men also may be targets of sexual abuse (Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, 1992; Frame, 1996). Clergy misconduct can range from verbal harassment to violent rape. When clergy betray their office of trust, their inappropriate behavior creates anguish, rage, shame, and powerlessness for both the church and the victim. In such instances, churches are traumatized and victims feel betrayed and confused (Fortune, 1989; Hopkins & Laaser, 1995; Lebacqz & Barton, 1991; Poling, 1991). It is not uncommon for churches to deny reports of clergy misconduct and blame the victim (Kennedy, 2003; Lind, 2005). Such denial is no less damaging, spiritually and emotionally, when the victim is female clergy. Sentilles (2008) states, "Women endure sexual harassment, individual discrimination, and systemic discrimination on a regular basis. And yet, when asked, most congregants don't think sexism is a problem in the church" (p.17).

Although the fear of harassment is a constant reality for female clergy (Lind, 2005) there is a paucity of empirical data concerning sexual misconduct, especially as it relates to sexual harassment within the church (Birchard, 2000; Frame, 1996). Lind (2005) states, "Female pastors are concerned about protecting themselves from unwelcomed approaches. Male pastors are concerned about protecting themselves against unfair allegations" (p. 77). Although there is a glaring gap in the literature, Seat, Trent, and Kim (1993), show in their research that 76.5% of surveyed clergy admitted having knowl-

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edge of a minister who had engaged in sexual intercourse with a person affiliated with his church. In another report, Birchard (2000) explored the cause of clergy sexual misconduct in a study that examined the behavior of men with adult women. The data showed that the absence of awareness training was the single most important factor in the causation of misconduct. However, other factors such as ambiguity of boundaries that come with the role, the neediness of the cleric, and the inattentiveness of the organizational structure also played major roles.

This article is intended to increase understanding and address how professional helpers (e.g., members of the clergy, crime victim/witness protection programs, licensed mental health professionals or counselors, and social workers) can respond to sexual harassment complaints from female clergy and to discuss preventative strategies that can protect church members from its damaging effects.

CASE VIGNETTE

Consider Kendra's story that was shared during a personal interview. Although personal details have been changed to protect her identity, her narrative illustrates this prevalent problem within ministerial relationships.

Kendra is the fictitious name of a 55-year-old mother of five who acknowledged her calling to preach at 46 years of age. Similar to others, she wrestled with the inner call to serve in ministry. Finally her sense of purpose and growing commitment led her to enroll in seminary and complete a Master's of Divinity degree. While she was at seminary she served an urban congregation of 200 people with the male senior pastor and one male associate. At first she was impressed and grateful that the senior pastor gave her so much personal attention and taught her basic day-to-day duties

that were not taught in seminary.

The suave salt-and-pepper haired senior pastor was married with one adult child living away from home. His wife stayed home to manage the household. Often working late hours or during times when the church was barely occupied, Kendra noticed these seemingly insignificant comments he made related to her physical appearance. He made comments about her hair or the gentle, pleasing scent of her perfume. She dismissed it as flattery. She recalled how he would sit or stand closer than she considered appropriate when showing her documents or during conversations, making her uncomfortable. Once when she shifted

her position to put more physical distance between them, he inquired if something was wrong. She replied, "Not really." Gradually he gave her admiring glances when others were not around or he would seek her out in her small office to talk about the stagnation in his marriage. Once he brushed against her. Again she dismissed any discussion relative to boundary violation and his too-familiar mannerisms. She convinced herself that if she avoided him, he would get the message and give her more physical space and she could still work within the church.

Things changed when the pastor informed her that his wife was out of town and asked if she would stop by his home for dinner and dessert. His emphasis on DESSERT was a strong clue that he did not mean Jell-O. Kendra finally confronted the pastor about his implication that she would become romantically involved with him. Rather than apologize, he shamed her and told her how ungrateful she was for all he was doing for her.

From this point on she increased her avoidance of him but felt guilty and alone. She felt that there was no one she could tell. The pastor was very persuasive and had a likeable personality. He could convince people that she was the problem, which would mean that she would probably be asked by the congregation

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to leave. Within a year, Kendra left the church presuming that the congregation would merely dismiss her complaint and deny her allegations without direct proof. She reasoned that the ongoing stress of trying to prove her complaint was too much to endure.

For Kendra the trust that she had placed in the senior pastor over a period of two years was shattered. She had a fervent desire to preach and had invested in seminary education to honor and prepare for the sacred calling of God. Likewise, the congregation had evaluated and affirmed her calling with joy. How does she ignore the call for service and spiritual ministry in her life? What church would accept her if the senior pastor disparaged her name and reputation? How does she effectively respond to the pastor's pressure and the fact that sexual harassment would put her ministry at risk? Kendra felt trapped because she had less social power, while he had wisdom, power, position, and the heart and trust of the people.

#### THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment can take many forms, including requests for sexual favors, unwelcome sexual advances, or other conduct of a physical, verbal or visual nature that is unwelcome and offensive. It can be a supervisor who requires sexual activity in order to keep a job or receive a promotion. It may come from co-workers who create a hostile working environment by making suggestive or demeaning comments; displaying sexual objects or pictures; telling dirty jokes; or touching, patting, or pinching (New Hampshire Commission on the Status of Women, 1997). Lind (2005) states that sexual harassment is more about power than about sex and it can also take the form of manipulation of a situation that threatens the integrity of the other person. In the church, it is primarily experienced by women, but not exclusively (p.77). Another form of sexual harassment is *quid pro quo* ("this for that") in which someone with power over another person offers some kind of advantage in exchange for sexual favors (Friberg & Laaser, 1998, p. 60).

According to the National Women Law Center (2000) sexual harassment is widespread and affects women in every workplace setting and at every level of employment. No occupation is immune from sexual harassment, but the incidence of harassment is higher in workplaces that have traditionally excluded women. Very few harassed women, only 5% to 15%, formally report problems of harassment. The report indicates that women are sometimes reluctant to make allegations of sexual harassment for a number of reasons. Their reluctance includes fear of losing their jobs or otherwise damaging their careers, fear of not being believed, the belief that nothing can or will be done about the harassment, and embarrassment or shame at being harassed (Garland, 2006; Lind, 2005).

Sexual harassment often has a serious and negative impact on women's physical and emotional health; the more severe the harassment, the more severe the impact. The reactions frequently reported by women include anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, weight loss or gain, loss of appetite, and headaches (Frame, 1996; National Women Law Center, 2000). Socially, people may distance themselves from a complainant because they don't want to get involved or don't understand what she is experiencing.

Every clergy or minister is a symbol of religious authority. By virtue of the pastoral office, the minister interprets religious truth, the meaning of life, the way of faith, and even the reality of God (Chibnall, Wolf, & Duckro, 1998; Poling, 2005; Robinson, 2004). Add to that status the power of the pastor's presence through ministry, and the special influence a minister holds among his or her congregation. In addition, female clergy supervised by senior male clergy may develop a special trust that can lead to openness and vulnerability. Feeling bonds of trust and affirmation, female clergy may bring the vulnerable, wounded, and intimate sides of themselves into the relationship, seeking acceptance, emotional support, and a role model. When the male clergy exploits his privileged position for personal sexual satisfac-

tion, he violates a sacred trust that is contrary to Christian morals, doctrine, and canon laws. Because of the respect and even reverence the position carries, there is an imbalance of power and hence a vulnerability inherent in the ministerial relationship (Chibnall, Wolf, & Duckro, 1998; Poling, 2005; Robinson, 2004). In these circumstances, this imbalance of power makes it the responsibility of the church leader to maintain appropriate emotional and sexual boundaries with colleagues. Once violated, the female clergy may feel deep shame or self-condemnation. She may be afraid others will not believe her or fear being blamed by church officials or members. The sad consequence is that many times the female clergy can experience a crisis of faith and even leave the Church altogether, believing that neither God nor the body of Christ was present in her suffering (Francis & Turner, 1995). Sexual harassment may affect prayer, one's image of God, and one's relationship to God (Chibnall, Wolf, & Duckro, 1998).

#### PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Sexual misconduct is a troubling matter for communities and especially congregations. When it occurs among female clergy who have responded to a sacred call, it represents a distortion of power and trust. Sadly, sexual misconduct damages the morale of the entire church body. However, churches show wisdom when they take action to address the brokenness and pain experienced by the church and female clergy. The following is not an exhaustive list of prevention strategies but it is offered as a guide to assist churches in reducing

incidences of female sexual harassment.

1. Increase Awareness Training – Because of differences in Biblical interpretation, many churches do not recognize or advocate for women in ministerial roles as God's spiritual leaders. Therefore, in their role as God's spiritual authority, male clergy usually have the benefit of a significant power differential with respect to female clergy (Birchard, 2000; Kennedy, 2003). Male clergy should receive ongoing awareness training regarding this imbalance and be instructed in behaviors that may violate or blur the boundaries of a professional relationship.

Awareness training can also benefit male clergy regarding ways to effectively address their emotional, physical, and personal needs related to ministry. For example, when male clergy encounter personal problems (i.e., marital, loneliness, or neediness), requesting help from professional psychotherapists

or trusted mentors would involve less risk than seeking out female clergy as sympathizers. Awareness training could increase sensitivity about male power issues, significantly minimize the danger of boundary violations, and promote actions and behaviors that are considered safe, acceptable, and respectful.

2. Require Specialized Ministerial Training in Counseling – Similar to other professionals whose duties may include the need to counsel others, ministers also struggle with receiving specialized training and demonstrating expertise in counseling techniques within the scope of ministry. Even though male clergy receive training in theology, many are not equipped to deal with diverse and complex



human problems and needs (Kennedy, 2003). Likewise, many may not have received clinical supervision in counseling, training in transference (unresolved feelings, conflicts, and dependencies of the client onto the therapist/counselor) and counter-transference (the therapist/counselor's



unresolved feelings, conflicts, and dependencies onto the client) issues (Kennedy, 2003), or instruction relative to standards for professional ethics (Frame, 1996). Such training would address the risks regarding inappropriate sexual situations, the inherent hazards of the therapy process, maintaining appropriate boundaries (Birchard, 2000; Lind, 2005), and the ethics of professional behaviors.

The development of such training requirements could help senior clergy in their leadership roles to show care and warmth and to demonstrate competency and trustworthiness when female clergy seek their counsel. Without clinical training or expertise, churches should recognize that females seeking help can be in a vulnerable position. For this reason, guidelines should be adopted to assist male clergy who may be called upon to help female clergy needing assistance to cope with a personal or professional crisis. However, the responsibility for not breaching the pastoral bond or the balance of power within the pastoral relationship lies solely with male clergy.

3. Create Written Guidelines and Disciplinary Measures – Churches can benefit from clear ethical codes, policies, and procedures regarding what constitutes sexual harassment, sexual abuse, or sexual exploitation. These guidelines and clearly stated disciplinary measures regarding clergy abuse or misconduct will assist congregations in providing a safety net for the male pastor and those under his leadership. Kennedy (2003) states, “Every denomination should have policies and a complaints procedure in place. Discipline committees should

be composed of public members experienced in sexual offences and cases of professional abuse. There should be victim support systems in place, including tracking systems to follow up on both victims and offenders” (p. 235). This step could ensure that safeguards are in place to pursue pastoral and congregational

accountability and the avoidance of colluding in, covering up, or ignoring sexual harassment or abuse.

4. Prevention, Education, and Intervention Training for the Congregation – Prevention, education, and intervention training accessed through conferences and in-house programs should be provided to members and various leaders within the church on a regular basis. It is not an uncommon practice for congregations to “blame the victim” when male clergy are guilty of inappropriate sexual misconduct. Regrettably, the church usually maintains a state of denial regarding sexual misconduct and male leaders will frequently continue to hold prominent positions within the church while the victimized female experiences shame and trauma. Training should be mandatory within all levels of the church so congregants can help both male and female clergy be accountable and become skilled in developing and assessing policies and complaints. Additionally, the church can seek opportunities to share its advocacy efforts with others in the community and model ways to successfully respond to complaints, break the continuum of brokenness, and advocate for change in order to help the entire church membership to heal.

#### STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE THE HEALING PROCESS

Female clergy need assistance dealing with sexual harassment to minimize feelings of guilt, helplessness, frustration, and anger and to advance the healing process. As they reach out to professional helpers for counsel-

ing or supportive services (e.g., legal assistance and crisis intervention), they can benefit from strategies that will help them to honor the sacred calling on their lives and to channel a negative experience into positive energy. The following strategies, although not exhaustive, can break the wall of silence and start the healing process:

1. Encourage the Harassed Clergy to Acknowledge the Violation. People who experience sexual harassment often feel intimidated, embarrassed, or humiliated. They also may be fearful of repercussions if they speak up. Fear of ridicule and a sense of hopelessness about the dilemma may cause them to keep the problem concealed. In addition, some women affected may feel that the situation is a “private” one and therefore they may be reluctant to bring it to the attention of those who can help. Telling someone else about the experience is a way of getting help rather than keeping it hidden inside. Confiding in someone trustworthy, whether it is another clergy person, a close family member, a good friend, or a professional helper, is a step toward healing and doing something about the issue. Ultimately, it is imperative for her to realize that her feelings are not abnormal and that there are professionals who can provide the proper assistance to help her emotionally and psychologically with her pain. Fortune (1989), one of the foremost experts on clergy sexual misconduct states, “When victims can give voice to their specific experiences of violation, the secret loses its potency” (p. 114).

2. Advise the Survivor to Investigate Available Options Within and Outside the Church. To respond to the consequences of injustice, the victim must explore and weigh the available options inside the religious system as well as outside the bounds of the denomination or church. Depending on the extent and duration of the harassment, the clergy should exam-

ine her choices to determine if she will file a complaint, which may result in continued sexual harassment, individual discrimination, or systemic discrimination (Garland 2006). Other options include asking the harasser to publicly apologize, seeking financial and medical damages through the legal system, or pursuing a form of redress that would include restitution to compensate her for counseling. Should she strive for prompt and remedial action, she may be successful in compelling the church or denominational body to formally monitor the harasser and to insist that he participate in training and qualified counseling to ensure that he understands the damage and inappropriateness of his conduct (Garland, 2006).

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3. Validate the Survivor’s Pain and Need to Gain Control by Taking Back Her Power. Validating the hurt and anger and giving voice to the impact of the sexual harassment experience is another way for female clergy to take charge of her life and to move from a place of shame. When churches deny the violation of clergy sexual contact they support the perpetrator

rather than the victim. The survivor should be encouraged to share her story with other survivors (Fortune, 1989; Garland, 2006), re-establish ties with people she may have distanced herself from because of the harassment, and to form relationships with people who will be supportive. Accepting that sexual harassment happened and that she is not to blame helps her to view herself as a survivor. She may also find power in participating in victim support agencies or organizations that focus on sexual harassment issues, advocating for educational programs, sponsoring empowerment seminars for other female clergy, writing articles relative to sexual harassment issues, or lending her financial and spiritual support to individuals and groups that address the problem.

4. Encourage the Survivor’s Desire to Become a Resource to Other Women – De-

pending on the severity and longevity of her trauma, the female clergy may or may not be able to serve as an advocate for other women in ministry. If she can, she can lend her voice and insight to denominational or congregational efforts to draft policies regarding sexual harassment. Many congregations are independent and many denominations lack structures to address this issue, so there may or may not be safeguards in place to monitor or discipline male clergy who misuse their power and authority. When feasible, she may consider reading and providing input relative to proposed sexual harassment policies, accepting invitations to speak at special policy planning meetings, or serving in other capacities that are comfortable and appropriate to her interest in promoting safe environments for female clergy.

5. Teach the Survivor to Embrace the Process of Healing and Recovery. A system that perpetuates ignorance regarding the issues of power, sexuality, countertransference, and professional clergy ethics that is left unchallenged can result in fragmented and unhealed individuals and unhealthy boundaries (Robinson, 2004). To embrace the healing and recovery process survivors should seriously consider finding counselors who have experience working with sexual assault survivors so they can integrate the trauma and return to their previous level of functioning. If in-house congregational counselors are available, survivors of clergy abuse might benefit from individual, group, or support counseling outside of their denominations or congregations in order to minimize the pressure to forgive too quickly and minimize the effects of sexual harassment.

CONCLUSION

Sexual misconduct or sexually inappropriate behavior in the church is troubling and problematic for congregations and female clergy within the ministerial relationship.

Yet, too often faith communities tend to keep quiet about measures to address and prevent sexual harassment. Social workers, pastoral staff, mental health providers, pastors, and other helping professionals have a unique opportunity to provide support for female clergy who may seek counseling or spiritual direction about ways to cope and buffer stress in a male-dominated profession.

Providing care to female clergy may include advocating for prevention education within churches and faith-based conferences, assisting congregations to create safe environments for vulnerable women, establishing protocols for reporting and investigating reports of sexual misbehavior, developing proper training

in boundary violation, and identifying community resources that will address intervention and elements of healing following reports of sexual misconduct. Moreover, in regards to female clergy, Frame and Shehan (2004) recommend that professional helpers facilitate groups for female clergy that may can help build self-esteem, buffer isolation and loneliness, and offer a safe haven for survivors dealing with personal and professional issues.

Sadly, the misuse of power and the experience of sexual harassment do occur in houses of faith. Therefore, professional service providers and church leaders are challenged to address the reality of sexual harassment in the church, which entails the violation of trust and the disintegration of a safe working environment.

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## Less and Less

Soren Kierkegaard

I found I had less and less  
to say, until finally, I became  
silent, and began to listen.  
I discovered in the silence,  
the voice of God.