

# How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens: A Qualitative Study of First-Hand Accounts

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*This article reports a study based on phone interviews with 46 persons who as adults had experienced a sexual encounter or relationship with a religious leader. Fifteen others were also interviewed who had experienced the effects of those sexual encounters (husbands, friends and other staff members in the congregation), as well as two offending leaders. Subjects for this study were identified using networks of professionals, web sites, and media stories about the project. The resulting nonrandom sample of 63 subjects includes congregants from Jewish and a diversity of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and nondenominational congregations located across the United States. The software package Atlas-Ti was used to code the interview transcripts and then to identify five common themes that describe the social characteristics of the contexts in which clergy sexual misconduct (CSM) occurs. Based on these characteristics, implications are drawn for social work practice with congregations.*

Revelations of clergy sexual abuse of children have cost the U.S. Roman Catholic Church alone more than \$2.6 billion since 1950 (The Associated Press, 2009) and have led denominational leaders and religious ethicists to pay increased attention to religious leaders' sexual advances toward and sexual encounters with adult congregants. At least 36 denominations now have official policies that identify sexual relations between adult congregants and clergy as misconduct subject to discipline (Bromley & Cress, 2000). It is illegal in two states, Minnesota and Texas. The Texas penal code defines clergy sexual behavior as nonconsensual sexual assault if "the actor is a clergyman who causes the other person to submit or participate by exploiting the other person's emotional dependency on the clergyman in the clergyman's professional character as spiritual adviser" (Texas Penal Code Ch 5. (22.011; see also Minnesota Criminal Code 609.344).

## Introduction

Journalists have reported high profile cases of clergy sexual misconduct (CSM) when it has resulted in legal action. For example, in 2006 the archbishop of the International Communion of Charismatic Churches (ICCC) in Atlanta was forced to resign as a consequence of a lawsuit charging him with using his position and spiritual role to manipulate women to have sex with himself, members of his family, and others, including visiting pastors, for many years. There were allegations that he fathered a number of children by women in the congregation he led (Jewell, 2006). Case studies of clergy sexual misconduct have also been published (e.g., Clarion, 2007; Cooper, 2002; Fortune, 1989; Miller, 1993; Name withheld, 1995; N. W. Poling, 1999; Religion News Service, 2002). These accounts include cases from diverse faith traditions, including Protestant, Catholic, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Gerdes, Beck, & Miller, 2002) and Buddhism and non-traditional religious movements in the West (Adam, 1998; Jacobs, 1984; Oxenhandler, 2008). Nor is CSM a modern phenomenon. Historians trace sexual abuses in the Christian church between clerics and laity, senior clerics and novitiates in orders, and priests and nuns to medieval times (Shupe, 1998). One twelfth-century bishop fathered 65 children; another church leader, Pope Innocent VIII (d. 1492) bragged publicly about his brood of “bastards” (Jackowski, 2004).

### Prevalence of Clergy Sexual Misconduct with Adults

Those researching the prevalence of CSM with adults have depended for the most part on surveys of religious leaders asking if they have ever made a sexual advance toward or engaged in sexual activity with a congregant. These clergy self-report surveys range widely in their estimates of the number of religious leaders who have ever committed CSM with adults, from 1% to 15% (Francis & Stacks, 2003; Meek, McMinn, Burnett, Mazarella, & Voytenko, 2004; Seat, Trent, & Kim, 1993; Thoburn & Whitman, 2004). Stacey, Darnell, and Shupe (2000) surveyed a stratified random sample of all households in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area, not just those active in a congregation, and found that 3% reported “mental, sexual, or physical abuse” by clergy. The most comprehensive study to date developed a subset of

questions about clergy sexual misconduct that were included in the 2008 General Social Survey, a stratified random sample of the U.S. population. Overall, 3.1% of women who attend religious services at least monthly reported that at some time during their adult life, they had been the object of a sexual advance by a clergy person or religious leader in their own congregation; more than half of those (2.2% of the whole sample) report sexual advances by a religious leader who was at the time married to someone else. Thus, one in 33 women in congregations has been the object of a sexual advance by a religious leader; or, more narrowly, one in 40 women who attend a congregation has been the object of an illicit sexual advance by her own married religious leader (Chaves & Garland, forthcoming).

### **Characteristics of Clergy Who Offend**

A few researchers have attempted to identify the characteristics of clergy who offend sexually. Laaser and Friberg (1998) studied 25 religious leaders who had been reported for sexual misconduct; the average number of victims was two, although the researchers suspected that the self reporting may not have been honest. Offenders were male and had functioned in ministry for at least 25 years. Based on this sample, Laaser and Friberg conclude that the most common offender is a man who is reasonably successful and has a combination of narcissism, sexual compulsion, and need for affirmation. Others have reached similar conclusions (Francis & Baldo, 1998; Steinke, 1989; see also Grenze & Bell, 2001). Shupe (2007) has described religious groups and institutions as hierarchies of unequal power where leaders have powers of moral persuasion, and in some, theological authority to deny others access to membership and even ultimately the hope of eternal life. Capps (1993) earlier theorized that religious leaders have: (1) the power that comes with not being under surveillance or supervision of others; (2) the power of access and accessibility; and (3) the power of knowledge about members of their congregation, often intimate knowledge). Moreover, whether intentionally or not, religious leaders take on the charisma of office or title in the deity's name, leading congregants to view them with awe (J. N. Poling, 2005). The culture of religious groups and organizations encourages trust in the benevolent and selfless intentions as well as the spiritual insights/wisdom of their leaders (Shupe, 2007; see also Nestingen, 1977).

## **The Process of Clergy Sexual Misconduct**

Case studies of clergy sexual misconduct (Fortune, 1989; N. W. Poling, 1999) and those who provide care for those affected by CSM (Carnes, 1997; Flynn, 2003; Fortune, 1989; Horst, 1998, 2000; Kennedy, 2003; Liberty, 2001; J. N. Poling, 1991) have observed patterns that characterize this misconduct. They use the term “grooming” to describe the leader’s behavior that functions to develop a close relationship with the offended. Grooming includes expressions of admiration and concern, affectionate gestures and touching, talking about a shared project, and sharing of personal information (Carnes, 1997; see also Garland, 2006). Grooming may be gradual and subtle, desensitizing the congregant to increasingly inappropriate behavior while rewarding her for tolerance of that behavior. Offenders may use religious language to frame the relationship, such as “You are an answer to my prayer; I asked God for someone who can share my deepest thoughts, prayers, and needs and he sent me you” (Liberty, 2001, p. 85). Grooming is essentially seduction in a relationship in which a religious leader holds spiritual power over the congregant. For example, evangelist Jim Bakker allegedly depicted himself as a tired minister to millions of persons while no one ministered to him as a means of gaining sexual access to women. He implied that by giving to him sexually, women could empower him to minister to others (Friberg & Laaser, 1998).

The case studies suggest that a congregant trusts her religious leader, and she allows him to say and do things to her she would not allow a man in a normal friendship to say or do. The first sexual behaviors that these reports refer to as “boundary crossings” may be just slightly over the edge of appropriateness, such as a full-body hug or taking her hand in his and caressing it during prayer (e.g., N. W. Poling, 1999). The clergy’s position of power and the trust she has in him because of that role cause her to doubt her own ability to discern the intent of the action when she would have been clear about its intent if it occurred in a relationship with someone else. Once the behavior becomes overtly sexual, she fears that no one will believe her, or that she will be labeled a seductress. She may be very confused, sometimes enjoying the attention and affection she is receiving from him, making it even more difficult to restore relationship boundaries, even though she is alarmed and frightened. Because the relationship is secret, she

cannot reach out to anyone for help, realistically fearing condemnation and destruction of social relationships and, if married, of her family. In fact, the offender is the only one with whom she can discuss her feelings, and such conversations further her isolation and the deepening attachment (Carnes, 1997; Horst, 1998).

### **Results of Clergy Sexual Misconduct**

The results of CSM in the lives of offenders whose offense becomes known to superiors or to the congregation vary widely. In several cases known to the first author, the pastor simply started a new congregation in the same town or city, splitting the old congregation as loyal congregants followed him to the new church. Others move and are hired by existing congregations, some unaware and some with knowledge of his past behavior. In still other situations, he is forgiven and continues to lead in the same congregation. In congregations with central denominational governments and in other religious organizations, superiors may choose quietly to relocate him, to suspend him for a period of time or permanently, and/or to require him to receive psychological treatment as a condition of continuing or returning to leadership.

Reports based on case studies and on clinical intervention with the offended suggest that the results for the offended include self-blame; shame; loss of community and friends if forced to relocate either to escape the community's judgment or to escape an angry offender who has been discovered or reported; spiritual crisis and loss of faith; family crisis and divorce; psychological distress, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder; physiological illness; and failed or successful suicide attempts (Carnes, 1997; Chibnall, Wolf, & Duckro, 1998; Flynn, 2003; Garland, 2006; Hidalgo, 2007; Kennedy, 2003; McLaughlin, 1994).

### **Question: What are the Social Systemic Conditions that allow CSM to Occur?**

As important as understanding the psychological dynamics of CSM is for those professionals faced with intervention and treatment of offenders, offended, and congregations, CSM occurs in a particular social context. Shupe (2007) has called CSM "normal" in the sense that it is ubiquitous in religious community life, noting that "bad pastors" are no less surprising than "fleecing accountants, seducing professors, crooked cops, pilfering bankers,

money-laundering corporate executive officers, and philandering therapists" (p. 7). To describe CSM, Shupe uses the term "elite deviance," which refers to illegal and/or unethical acts committed by persons in the highest corporate and political strata of society who run little risk of exposure or serious punishment, even though their deviance poses danger to the well-being of many others (Simon & Eitzen, 1982).

Therefore, given the ubiquity of CSM, our research team sought to identify the social characteristics common to the communities in which CSM occurs that allow or encourage CSM. We do not focus on the study of the psychological characteristics and motivations of the offenders and offended. The research question we attempt to address is, "What are the social systemic conditions that allow CSM to occur?" Identifying these conditions may then point us to possible strategies for preventing or reducing the incidence of CSM.

## Methods

The research team contacted a network of experts and support groups to identify both offenders and offended who were willing to be interviewed. The first author had published an article reviewing the literature on clergy sexual misconduct with adults just months before launching this project (Garland, 2006). Several press releases about the project were published in various newspapers and other venues, resulting in a number of offended persons voluntarily contacting the first author. Support groups also willingly disseminated news of the project via their websites, evidently common sources of help for those who have been offended.

The project has used the terms "offender" to refer to clergy who commit CSM rather than the often-used term "perpetrator." The term "offended" refers to those with whom clergy commit CSM rather than the often-used terms "victim" and "survivor." Because CSM may involve a range of intentionality and forethought, we have chosen the terms of "offense" because they do not imply intent or forethought on the part of the religious leader, nor necessarily the innocence or helplessness of the congregant. We also use female pronouns for the offended and male for the offenders, given that most religious leaders are male heterosexuals; in the 2008 General Social Survey study, all of the offenders were male and 96% of the offended were female (Chaves & Garland, forthcoming).

## Research Subjects

The resulting group of interviews consists of 46 individuals who were directly offended, all from different congregations. We also interviewed 15 who were secondarily offended, including seven husbands of offended women, a mother of an offended adult daughter, a friend of an offended woman, four fellow congregants of the offended, and two congregational staff members serving with an offender. We also interviewed two offenders. We were disappointed not to be able to increase the number of offenders in the sample, but we were told repeatedly that dangers of litigation prevented them from talking with us. One of the offenders with whom we talked said that virtually all “get away with it,” without personal consequences, and contributing to a project like this would put offenders at direct risk for law suits or loss of employment. Similarly, non-offending leaders in congregations where CSM had occurred were unwilling to talk with the research team for fear of opening the congregation to litigation.

The sample compares roughly to the national study in which 96% of the offended were female and all offenders were male (Chaves & Garland, forthcoming). This nonrandom sample is slightly more male and includes women offended by female religious leaders. Of the 46 offended in this sample, 4 (8.7%) are male, and all four of their offenders are male—three Catholic and one Mormon. Of the 42 women we interviewed, 40 (95%) of those who offended them are male, and two are female (a Catholic religious order superior and a Protestant pastor). Given that 87% of the 46 cases of CSM we studied involved male offenders and women offended, we have continued to use male pronouns for offenders and female pronouns for offended in presenting our findings, with the disclaimer that our findings document that both men and women offend, and that the offense can be either heterosexual or homosexual in nature.

The religious groups of the offended at the time of the CSM include the following, in descending order of representation: Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, Disciples of Christ, Mormon, Apostolic, Calvary Chapel, Christian Science, Church of Christ, Episcopal, Friends, Mennonite, evangelical non-denominational, and Reformed Judaism. The order should not be construed to suggest that CSM is more common in some denominations than others, given the nonrandom nature of

our sampling and the widely varying size of these denominational groups. Rather, it suggests the widespread nature of CSM. Offenders were in the roles of priest and pastor predominantly, but there also were religious leaders in the categories of chaplain (armed services and college), superior in a religious order, rabbi, and “leader” (in religious groups without pastors or priests). Since the time of the CSM, some of the offended had changed their own religious identity or eschewed religion entirely as a result of the CSM they experienced, but a number have continued to be active congregants, although almost always having relocated to a different congregation. The offended ranged in location from Maine to California and from Washington to Florida. Five of the respondents (11%) were African-American, suggesting that they were underrepresented in our sample; the national survey found 50% of those experiencing CSM at some time in their adult life were African-American (Chaves & Garland, forthcoming).

### **Interview Process**

We initially had determined to travel to congregation sites and conduct interviews there. Some of the offended were still living with the secret of the offense, however, and we were challenged with the difficult task of finding a venue for an interview that they deemed protected from community or family awareness. Additionally, given the offense they had experienced, meeting with a researcher in a secluded space had the potential of creating undue anxiety. In fact, one of the offended had first experienced CSM in an interview setting, when the offended agreed to be interviewed by the religious leader as part of the leader’s research for an academic degree in professional ministry.

After struggling with these issues in attempts to schedule sites for the first two interviews, we proposed to subjects that we conduct the interview by phone. We found that subjects actually preferred the private nature of a phone call, which is how the remaining interviews were conducted. The use of phone interviews also allowed us to greatly expand the reach of this project geographically without appreciably expanding the budget, enabling us to obtain a much larger and more diverse sample. The phone venue had limitations however, eliminating the ability of the interviewer to observe nonverbal behavior.

A single statement focused the interview: “I understand that you experienced a sexual encounter with a religious leader; I want



to learn what leads to religious leaders engaging in sexual behavior with people in their congregations, so tell me about how it began." Such an unstructured interview protocol is justified when looking at phenomena that have not been previously studied. The interviewer probed for specific behavioral details of how the relationship between the offended and the offender developed and became sexualized, as well as descriptions of the environmental (social and physical) context. Interviews lasted 60 to 120 minutes. The interviewer used a headphone and typed the transcript directly during the interview. Typing the interview directly rather than from an audio recording eliminated interviewees' fear of tapes existing with their names and voices. The interviewer typed pseudonyms rather than actual names for all parties in the original transcript. Actual names were stored in a separate document in an encrypted computer with only codes connecting names with interview transcripts. Our university's Institutional Review Board determined that the project's methodology adequately protected subjects from potential harm.

### **Data Analysis**

We were seeking to identify common themes that would suggest the interpersonal and organizational contexts in which CSM developed and, in many cases, continued over extended periods of time. We used the software package Atlas-Ti and open coding methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Weiss, 1994) to define the themes in the transcripts of the remembered experiences of those we interviewed. We were not driven by concepts in the extant literature, but we used the actual language of the participants in order to avoid attributing meanings that they did not intend. So instead of using terms such as "grooming" from the literature, which has a negative connotation by its association with the behavior of pedophiles, we used behaviorally specific codes, such as the following: "saying he admired me," "gave gifts," and "asking for or giving hugs or kisses." When an interviewee said "he gave me special attention," the interviewer probed with, "If I were making a movie, what would that scene look like; what did he do or say that felt like special attention?"

The two authors independently coded three entire interview transcripts and determined our interrater reliability to be 92%. That is, both of us assigned the same code to the same portion of text more than 92% of the time. We considered this to be a strong

indicator that our codes were reliably capturing remembered behavioral experiences. A set of 235 codes emerged from the analysis.

## Findings

Most of the offended identified the experience they had with their religious leaders as romantic affairs. Eleven experienced verbal abuse; six were physically threatened as a means to keep them silent or sexually compliant. Six women described violent rapes. We have not provided percentages for the prevalence of these characteristics of the misconduct, however, given the nonrandom nature of our sample.

The focus of the coding was to identify community characteristics that allow or even encourage CSM and so could be addressed with prevention strategies, not the motivations or intentions of the offenders and offended. Moreover, characteristics of the community setting are less likely to be subject to biased reconstruction than recall of intentions and motivations. Our analysis resulted in discerning five common themes concerning the contexts and situations in which CSM takes place.

### **1. Lack of Personal or Community Response to Situations that “Normally” Call for Action**

Most (n=23) of the offended said that they had felt uncertain of what was happening in their relationships with their religious leaders. Spouses and friends and other congregational leaders also were uncertain about the meaning of what they observed, and so they did nothing. Their trust of the leader was stronger than their trust of their own perceptions of the situation. In fact, it altered how they interpreted what they were experiencing.

For example, when Darla’s pastor asked her out to a restaurant for coffee, where he used sexual expletives in casual conversation, she was shocked and “thrown off balance” that a religious leader would use such sexually graphic language. She remembered telling herself “that it was more evidence that he was an authentic leader and further reason to trust him.” The pastor’s language broke social norms, and instead of confronting him with his inappropriateness, she allowed him to redefine the social norm. Graphic sexual language became a sign of authenticity.

The offended was confused about the meaning of behavior when she would otherwise have been confident in her understanding, i.e., if it were behavior of a peer and not a spiritual leader. Significant others also experienced this confusion and inability to identify the leader's behavior as inappropriate, suggesting that it is the aura of leadership that is operating in the social system and not just the imperceptiveness of the offended. In fact, significant others often encouraged their partners to trust the religious leader despite what otherwise would have been serious warning signs. For example, Wendy's husband found e-mails from their pastor professing romantic feelings for Wendy. Wendy was "spiraling into depression," however, and her husband believed they had nowhere else to turn for help, so he encouraged Wendy to pursue counseling with the pastor, even when the pastor confessed that he had already been inappropriate with Wendy. Wendy's husband recounted the conversation he had with his pastor:

The pastor said he was sorry for what happened. He said he emotionally got too close. He said he was trying to help. He said he would keep the desk between them. My mind was fuzzy. So I agreed to let him counsel her. He would come to our office [of the family business] and counsel her there.

In retrospect, the interviewees and those close to them realized that there were signs of the pending or already occurring misconduct that they ignored. They had no cognitive categories for understanding a religious leader acting sexually toward them or a loved one, so they labeled the behavior as something they did have a category for—their own overactive imaginations or sensitivities. They had no frame of reference for seeing and recognizing a trusted religious leader's sexual misbehavior, but they had cognitive frameworks for mistaken meaning in social situations. All of us have misread the behavior of others at one time or another, and we learn to "give the benefit of the doubt" so as to read the best possible meaning into the behavior of someone we trust. Samantha began looking for explanations that could describe what had gone on between her and her priest:

In the car on the way home, I wondered what on earth had happened. Because I wasn't able to face that he had made advances, I convinced myself that it was

just a mistake after all, that my imagination was running wild, and that a priest wouldn't attempt something sexual with me or anyone—and especially not this priest who was such a good friend.

Another husband, Rick, greatly enjoyed a close friendship with the pastor, one of the few close adult male friendships he had ever had. He became increasingly worried—"uncertain"—about the time his wife would spend with the pastor, however. Rick talked about one weekend after his wife returned from a church retreat:

She told me they [she and the pastor] went skinny dipping [i.e., swimming naked]. I didn't say anything to my wife, but I wondered what was going on. I didn't want to cause friction in the marriage. I was just overwhelmed. I wanted to say, "What are you doing?" I wanted to call my parents. But then it got smoothed over, and the worry went away.

Perhaps his wife told Rick to test her own perceptions of the situation, and his smoothing over the sexualized behavior between her and her pastor made action on her part even more difficult.

Twenty-four of those offended remembered the offender paying them special attention, beyond what would be expected, or normative, for a religious leader and a congregant. For example, Cindy remembers arriving at church on Sunday and seeing the priest in the processional line, preparing to lead worship. "He would break out of the line to come over and talk to me." Another time Cindy recounts the priest passing her in the aisle between services. "He asked if I had gotten a haircut. He didn't even know my name. It wasn't inappropriate but just an odd thing to say." In both cases, the behavior took place in the sanctuary, a sacred space. The behavior would not have seemed inappropriate in a casual relationship between peers, but it was outside the normative expectations of a religious leader's role during a worship service and so made Cindy feel "odd." Similarly, Kate remembers her anxiety when her pastor asked her to come into his office on Sunday mornings—alone—before he gave the sermon. Then he started calling her at home every Sunday morning.

At the time that these offended received these various forms of unusual—not normative—attention, it raised their sense of vi-

gillance enough that they remember and recall it after the later experience of CSM. At the time, however, although they reported feeling wary, that “something is odd,” they dismissed it as their overreaction or misunderstanding of their leaders’ intentions.

Adding to their confusion was the fact that many of these behaviors took place in a public setting: the pastor publicly invited Kate to his study before worship, a time when church offices are bustling with people; the priest stepped out of the worship procession to have a conversation with Cindy and commented on her hair when he passed by her in the church sanctuary full of worshippers. Kate’s pastor called her at her home each Sunday morning, when her husband and children were home. In some ways, the behaviors taking place in front of others seems to normalize the behavior, and indeed, although there is evidence that others may also respond warily (e.g., Kate’s husband wondering why the pastor was calling his wife), no alarms were sounded. Consequently, the offended’s self-message of “I’m making a mountain out of a molehill” or “I am too sensitive; this is our pastor” were confirmed by both the location for the special attention—public—and by the lack of response by other observers.

Whatever the offender’s motivations for these overtures, no one openly questioned or objected to the offender’s actions, resulting not only in the offended’s alarm system being silenced but also perhaps assuring the offender that his behavior must not be objectionable. After all, he called her when her husband was there; he invited her into his office when there were plenty of people around—and no one seemed to raise concerns. All the while, the offended and offender were forming a more intimate relationship that seemed to be accepted by the community, since it was being formed under the community’s collective eyes. Dawn recalled her Saturday ritual:

It then it got to where he would ask me to go to movies on Saturday morning, and then we would meet his wife for lunch. Nobody acted like it was strange. People said we were like brother and sister.

The actual behaviors paralleled a courtship: Dawn’s pastor would take her to the movies, just the two of them. Yet his wife would then meet them for lunch as though there was nothing unusual about her husband taking another woman to the movies. As the intimacy increases, so does the inability of the offended and per-

haps also the offender to challenge the growing bond between them.

Physical behaviors such as hugs and kisses are common in many Christian congregations, where “passing the peace” may include kisses on the cheek and embraces. More than half of the interviewees reported that their religious leaders hugged and kissed them in public. For example, Laura expressed that the minister at her church was “touchy-feely” with all the women, so when he started holding her hand, she didn’t think anything of it. Because the behavior took place in public, it took on an air of acceptability. He then wanted hugs from Laura in his office. Hugs in private can quickly take on a different meaning than hugs in a public setting, however. Rhonda remembered an uncomfortable instance between her and her rabbi in his office:

We both stood up, and he said, “How about a hug?”  
He pulled me into a full-body embrace, for too long. I  
was uncomfortable and pulled away, and he said he  
would be praying for me.

The juxtaposition of the embrace and her awareness that he had an erection (which she noted in a later statement) with the promise of prayer is confusing, suggesting that the inappropriate hug was part of his religious care.

There is a tendency in uncertain situations to believe that the outcome will be favorable, or what Ripley has called the “normalcy bias” (2008). If everyone else seems to be accepting of the situation, then it must be okay. If one reacts and then learns that she has misjudged the social situation, the result would be embarrassment and shame. Therefore, no one acts in order to avoid the possibility of social embarrassment. Ripley documents the normalcy bias in situations such as the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, where many people in the stricken towers stayed at their desks in uncertainty, waiting for clarification from others about what to do rather than evacuating. Although the situations of a religious leader acting inappropriately and a terrorist attack are dramatically different, the uncertainty about what is really happening, the disbelief that this could really be happening, and the fear of being wrong and being socially embarrassed are similar.

Fourteen of the offended were new to the faith community. Being new to a community is usually a time of heightened anxiety,

or as one respondent said, “exciting and frightening at the same time.” Being new means not yet knowing the community’s norms. When a religious leader is engaging in non-normative behavior, these new community members would be least likely to identify that behavior as inappropriate, especially if others in the community seem not to raise concerns.

## 2. Culture of Niceness

American culture expects people to be “nice” to others, most particularly those with whom we have caring relationships. By “nice,” we mean overlooking or ignoring the behavior of others that *we know to be socially inappropriate* rather than naming the behavior and risking embarrassing, angering, or hurting them. The offended we interviewed were living by this cultural norm, even in the face of offenders’ blatantly inappropriate behavior. In other words, they were not simply normalizing the offenders’ behavior and questioning their own perceptions; they recognized that the behavior was sexual and thus inappropriate and still they did not object. Kate remembered the first time the offender kissed her:

He kissed me, and I just figured it would be quick, but it wasn’t. I remembered first feeling it was totally wrong. It felt like I was kissing an old man. I thought, “How am I going to tell him this? I don’t want to hurt his feelings.” I tried [to confront him], but I couldn’t; it wasn’t right. I desperately wanted to tell him that this was all wrong, but I couldn’t hurt my closest friend with those words when he felt so deeply for me.

The norm of being “nice” was strengthened by some offenders giving gifts—books, jewelry, and cards—often religious in nature and so on the surface apparently appropriate, although singling out the congregant with this special attention. For example, Deena’s pastor left spiritual readings in her mail slot each day that he had chosen especially for her; her pastor then asked to meet with her daily to give her “spiritual direction.” Giving gifts with a spiritual character made it more difficult for the offended to object to the special attention they were receiving. Moreover, gifts communicate the expectation of something in return, further tightening the relationship.

### 3. Lack of accountability

Our world has increasingly privatized communication and consequent ability to avoid oversight or accountability to others. Instead of letters in a family mailbox, where anyone in the family can see that a member has received communication and from whom, letters come to private e-mail accounts out of sight of all who do not know the password. Instead of phones being located in public space, such as the kitchen wall, they are now in a purse or on a belt and can be used anywhere. Such communication allows a relationship attachment to form and deepen, removed from observation by others. Many of those interviewed told of long and frequent conversations over the phone or through e-mail with their offenders. Lorie thought back on the frequency with which she communicated with her offender: "By the end of the summer, we had talked almost every day on the telephone." Kate described how her pastor's slow progression from e-mail to phone conversations to visits desensitized her to what was happening:

He would start dropping me e-mails. I thought at first it was odd, but he said he wanted to be friends, so I set that aside. Then the phone calls, and then he started dropping by. He got me comfortable with what I should have known was abnormal.

These religious leaders evidently had no one to whom they accounted for the use of their professional time.

Religious leaders also often have unparalleled lack of accountability for *where* they spend their time and with whom. It is common in small congregations for the pastor to be the only full-time staff person. If there are other secretarial or professional staff members with offices in the congregation's building, they are commonly supervised by and answer to the religious leader. Leaders are out and about in the community, calling on congregants in the hospital or at home, during times of stress or crisis to offer comfort or to work on congregational business. There is no oversight should the visits move from being appropriate pastoral care to venues for misconduct. Darcee reported that her pastor was a frequent visitor for family meals and to watch television in the evening with Darcee's family. The visits then shifted from evenings to earlier in the day: "He started coming over to my



house during the day while my husband was at work and my children were in school.”

Fourteen of the interviewees reported going out with their offenders to different restaurants and entertainment venues. Gail and her pastor traveled away from anyone who might raise questions about the leader spending time alone with a female congregant: “He would take me to another town for lunch, mostly so he could drink and no one would know, and so people wouldn’t see us together.”

Interviewees reported that the offenders often used their church offices as places to engage them sexually. Kate knew the policies surrounding being in her pastor’s office:

Men and women were not supposed to counsel, but if it was necessary, there was a window in the door and it was required that the secretary be there. For the first period of time, he left the door open so she could see, but not hear. Over the span of a year, the door would be a little more closed, or she wouldn’t be there. Then the door was shut and she wasn’t there. He had covered the window with his jacket, and he closed the door all the way behind me.

The only observer of his schedule and compliance with the counseling policy was the part-time secretary, his supervisee. Policies to prevent CSM can thus be put in place but easily broken if a leader is not accountable to anyone.

#### **4. Overlapping and Multiple Roles**

Of the 46 offended congregants we interviewed, more than half ( $n = 24$ ) were in a formal counseling relationship with the religious leader. An additional 16 reported that they were regularly meeting alone with their religious leader for “spiritual direction.” They described spiritual direction as a private meeting between the leader and congregant in which the congregant shared personal struggles and concerns and the leader provided guidance about the use of spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation to deal with those struggles and concerns. The common characteristic of these two groups, together representing 87% of the sample, is that the leader was meeting alone on a regular basis to provide professional services. In some cases, interactions differed

from professional counseling relationships with other helping professionals, in that the direction of invitation was reversed. Instead of the congregant asking for help, the religious leader volunteered to provide the congregant with counseling. Two examples illustrate this reversal.

Laura's family had recently moved to a new city and she had become very active in the congregation. When she learned that her husband was on the verge of bankruptcy and had been involved in some "inappropriate relationships," the first place she went for help was her church. She asked to be given a "Stephen minister," a volunteer trained to provide help, but the pastor instead wanted to counsel her himself because she "had given so much to the church." She ended up divorcing her husband and having a sexual relationship with the pastor, who was married.

Darla described her pastor's approach to a number of women. She perceived him to be a very powerful, charismatic speaker. With her as well as with others who later reported his misconduct with them, he observed tears in her eyes while he was preaching, then called later that day, after worship, and said, "I saw your tears. Do we need to talk? Do you need counseling?" Touched that he was so observant and empathetic, Darla began seeing him for counseling, leading to sexual involvement.

In other cases, congregants themselves sought counseling from the religious leader. At the time of the offense, most of the offended had been experiencing a family crisis or loss—deteriorating relationship with a parent, a teenager using drugs, concern for a sister in an abusive relationship, a sequence of family deaths, death of a young child, loss of a husband, or divorce or end of a long-term romantic relationship. Nineteen of those offended reported that prior to the abuse they went to the church seeking help—and their religious leader provided it. When her sister accidentally killed her preschool daughter, Paula was plunged into depression and went to her pastor "out of complete desperation." During the first of many counseling sessions, he said to her, "It's apparent that your husband cannot meet your needs but I can, so we'll meet again." He hugged her, said he loved her, and kissed her on the lips.

Almost half of the offended explicitly stated that the counseling provided by the offender was frequent and/or extended over time—four years for Kate, sometimes several times a week; every day for Deena; once or twice a week over several months for Wendy; 18 months for Sandy. Not only did counseling provide the

initial context for CSM to occur, but also some offenders continued to engage the offended as counselees, even after the relationship became sexualized. Martha said that the religious leader convinced her that their sexual involvement was good and “part of the counseling,” even though he urged her to keep it secret because her husband would “would take it wrong and it would hurt him.”

In short, these counseling relationships were not a one-time crisis intervention by a religious leader at a hospital bedside or before or after the funeral of a loved one. They took on the characteristics of a psychotherapeutic relationship of multiple “sessions,” often extended over time, sometimes even at the initiative of the religious leader.

Most of the offended (57%) report that in addition to being a religious leader and often a counselor or spiritual director as well, the offender was a friend, confidante, or family-like figure. For some, the offender was a parental figure. For example, Gail describes the multi-layered relationship she had with her religious leader, who was a chaplain at her college. Although she had been an atheist growing up, he involved her in mission trips and eventually, through long conversation with him, she decided to become a Christian and he baptized her. They began to meet for lunch and subsequently developed a sexual relationship, even though she reported that he was like a father to her. She was 24; he was 59 and married.

In another example of these multiple and overlapping roles, Kate described a four-year counseling relationship with her religious leader in which he helped her to sort through her childhood rape and deteriorating relationships with her father and brother. Over time, she and her husband became more involved in the church, and the religious leader became an intimate friend as well as the one who knew so much about her abusive past. He became “like a family member,” picking up groceries or going with her to take a child to the doctor with her husband’s knowledge, spending evenings with her and her husband watching television. As time passed, the pastor became more intimate with her, coming to her home when her husband was away and having sex with her in his office while other people were in the outer office.

Offenders defined the terms of their relationship with the offended by saying that they were stepping out of their leadership role to become a sexual partner. For example, Cindy remembers sitting across a restaurant table from her priest and listening to

him say, “I’m a priest but I’m also a man. I’ve never had a relationship with a woman before.”

## 5. Trust in the Sanctuary

The congregation and its leaders are expected to be safe, a “sanctuary,” where vulnerabilities will be protected. Congregants expect to be able to confess personal thoughts and struggles to their religious leaders without fear of those confessions being used to manipulate them. Leaders are supposed to be safe sources of guidance and forgiveness. Interviewees recalled that one of the ways the offender gained closeness that led to sexual activity was by using knowledge gained from their confessions as a way to breach what would have been their ability to protect themselves. An expectation of emotional closeness is assumed after sharing deeply personal issues. The closeness is deepened when the other knows aspects of one’s life few others know – a shared secret. This emotional closeness gave the offender additional power as the keeper of the offended’s secrets.

Congregants trust their leaders to protect their families; these leaders are those that perform weddings and are expected to be present and supportive to congregational families through times of crisis. Instead, these offenders often denigrated the women’s spouses, driving a wedge into what they knew was a vulnerable marriage. In the aftermath of the death of her child, by definition a marital crisis, Paula’s pastor told her that her husband would never be able to meet her needs. Delores remembers the tension between her husband, who had a leadership role in the church, and the pastor as the pastor began to initiate a relationship with her:

It was a constant battle. The pastor would attack my husband in a deacon’s meeting; “You are stupid, you are illiterate, you would be nothing without your wife.”

Because of her deep sense of trust in the religious leader to be a source of truth and protection, Delores believed her pastor’s negative evaluation of her partner, creating distance in her marriage and deepening her dependence on the pastor.

In contrast, some offenders expressed admiration of the offended, sometimes as compliments about their spirituality. Dawn felt as though her offender was validating her relationship with

God: "He could see good in me. It was intoxicating. I felt like God really loved me for the first time. I felt unburdened." The offender's admiration struck a chord with Dawn because it corresponded with her spiritual vulnerability. It is a significant boost to self-esteem to be favored by a powerful religious leader. Some offenders spoke to the offended about leaving their marriages to start a new life of ministry with the interviewees. Tess spoke to her pastor frequently on the phone:

He started talking to me about marriage and divorcing our spouses and working together in ministry because that is what God wanted. God had put us together for a reason. I believed him. He said, "Sometimes there's pain, but there is a reason for it." He talked about how he had thought about writing a book, and we would be good to write a book together. We were supposed to be together.

### **Study Limitations**

Several cautions are in order in drawing implications from this study. First, the interviewees volunteered for this project and they may differ from others who heard of the study but declined to participate. Second, the sample was overwhelmingly one-sided, those who had been offended by religious leaders. Few religious leaders and other congregational leaders in settings where CSM had occurred were willing to participate in the study. It is impossible to know if and the extent to which the offended interviewees biased their recalled experiences to accentuate that the misconduct was at the leader's initiative and not their own. There is significant potential for social desirability bias in these reports, in subtle as well as more overt ways. That does not make these accounts untrue or lessen the responsibility leaders have for maintaining appropriate boundaries with congregants.

These accounts generally reflect a stereotypic gender bias, with men as sexual initiators in powered positions. It may be that people who exhibit more traditional gender roles are more likely to be active in religious communities, or that religious communities themselves elicit traditional gender roles, even in people who adopt less traditional gender roles in other settings. Many religious groups reinforce traditional gender roles by limiting leadership to males. Even so, there were homosexual (male and female)

incidents in the sample as well; no differences were noted in the contextual factors addressed.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Despite the limitations of this study, it does illuminate the contextual dynamics of CSM in these cases and suggests what might be helpful prevention and early intervention strategies.

#### **Community Education**

The finding of a “lack of personal or community response to situations that call for action” suggests that community ignorance about the prevalence and characteristics of CSM leads to paralysis rather than action in the face of early warning signs. Education about the dynamics of CSM has been limited to seminary ethics courses and continuing education for pastors, neither of which reaches the lay governing bodies responsible for the actions of their leaders or the members who, if they were aware of these dynamics, may be more willing to trust their perceptions when a leader’s behavior infringes upon or shifts community norms. Social workers who serve in or consult with congregations can develop or locate educational resources for congregants that address the topics of power, leadership, and the abuse of power.

Positional power is a characteristic of roles carried not only by religious leaders but also by congregants in the larger community (teachers, supervisors, employer, parents). Therefore, addressing the ethical and moral use of power is an appropriate focus of religious education. Within this broader framework, congregations could explore the meaning and terrible consequences of abusive relationships in general and of CSM in particular. The research team is in the process of developing a Christian bible study series on the topic of power that addresses how Christians handle power (Kabat, Garland & Scarborough, forthcoming).

#### **Developing Prevention Policies and Codes of Ethics**

Moreover, congregations educated about the dynamics of CSM may be more willing to wrestle with defining what is and is not the role of the religious leader and with creating a system of accountability that can protect religious leaders as well as congregants from potential misconduct. In their work with congregations, social workers have the opportunity to lead them in devel-

oping prevention strategies and ethical codes of conduct for their leaders (for sample strategies and ethical codes, see <http://Baylor.edu/clergysexualmisconduct/>).

### **Advocacy for Legislation**

A significant challenge in addressing this problem as social workers is challenging assumptions that because the offended is an adult then the relationship was consensual and thus an “af-fair.” Regardless of what might be construed as consent on the part of the offended, a sexual relationship between a religious leader and a follower is an abuse of power just as is the case when a social worker has a sexual relationship with a client. Currently clergy sexual misconduct is illegal in only two states, Minnesota and Texas. One of the outcomes of this project has been to engage legal experts to develop sample legislation that can be used by social workers and other advocates to develop state legislation designed to avoid challenges on the basis of church/state separation (Helge & Toben, 2009). Such legislation not only could change attitudes about the nature of clergy sexual misconduct, but could also empower congregations and the offended to take action that removes offenders from positions of leadership where they can continue to do harm.

### **Developing Intervention Strategies**

Although this project did not focus on the provision of clinical services, it was disconcerting that a number of those we interviewed told us that that the clinicians—social workers and psychologists—from whom they sought help in the aftermath of CSM did not address the abuse of power or the spiritual nature of the abuse they had experienced. The helping professionals identified the experiences of these congregants as “affairs.” Christians who are helping professionals need to take lead in (1) educating the helping professions on the dynamics and consequences of CSM; and (2) developing effective approaches to intervening in the lives of offenders, the offended, their families, and the community life of congregations.

### **Conclusion**

Whenever people are given power, they have the opportunity to abuse it, and some do. It is clear that religious leaders are not

exceptions. In addition to religious leaders' responsibility to handle the power they are given in ways that protect rather than harm, it is also the responsibility of the community that gives them power to provide safeguards to protect against abuses. Taking a systemic rather than a psychological approach to understanding the dynamics of clergy sexual misconduct suggests the importance of public education and the development of prevention strategies and policies, as well as policies and even legislation for responding in the aftermath of CSM. ❖

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**Key Words:** congregations; congregational studies ; sexual abuse ; clergy sexual misconduct ; power ; abuse of power

**Acknowledgements:** We are grateful for generous funding for this project from The Ford Foundation, the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, and the JES Edwards Foundation of Fort Worth, TX. We would like to express appreciation to our colleagues Rick Chamiec-Case, Mark Chaves, Ellen Netting, Mary Katherine O'Connor and Terry Wolfer for their review and critique of this article.

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