



Living the Sacred Trust: Clergy Sexual Ethics

Section II: Theoretical

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Table of Contents

Fiduciary Duty and Sacred Trust..... 3

 Introduction: Case Studies..... 3

 Data and Definitions..... 4

 Sacred Trust..... 6

 Power (Donald) 7

 Interpersonal Boundaries in Ministry (Sandra) 9

 Absence of Consent (Jerome) 12

 Conclusion..... 15

 Author Biography..... 16

 Appendix A: Guidelines for Professional Ethics: An Early Warning System 17

Reductionist Models 18

 Systems Model 21

 Proposition One..... 22

 Proposition Two..... 23

 Proposition Three 23

 Proposition Four 24

The Ecology of Sexual Exploitation 24

 Microsystems, Mesosystems, Exosystems, Macrosystems..... 24

Mesosystem and Microsystem Problems..... 27

 Organizational Culture: Boundaries Controlling the Expression of Power, Aggression
Sexuality..... 27

 Organizational Code of Professional Practice..... 28

 Organizational Turbulence and Parishioner/Clergy Vulnerability 29

Incestuous Systems..... 30

The Broader View..... 31

Bibliography..... 33

Author Biography..... 33

Fiduciary Duty and Sacred Trust

By Darryl W. Stephens

“Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other” (1 Corinthians 10:24).

The sacred trust of ministry is broken when a person in a ministerial role of leadership engages in misconduct of a sexual nature. This article explains the theological and ethical foundations for the sacred trust of ministry in terms of fiduciary duty, power, interpersonal boundaries, and consent.

INTRODUCTION: CASE STUDIES

Jerome, a single man in his late twenties, is in his third year as pastor of Grace Church, a growing United Methodist congregation in a bustling suburb of a major city. Marjorie, a single woman in her mid-twenties, joined Grace Church two years ago after a difficult divorce. Recently, she’s begun to pay more and more attention to her pastor. It is clear to others in the congregation that they have a mutual attraction to each other, and some members gossip about how they might encourage this budding romance. Eventually, Jerome asks Marjorie on a date so that the two of them can get to know each other in a more personal way. Soon they are dating regularly. Jerome chooses to keep things quiet and not to involve the church leadership in his personal affairs . . .

Sandra is a vivacious and dynamic youth leader at Hamstead Hills UMC in an up-and-coming re-gentrifying community just east of downtown Nashville, Tennessee. She is thirty-four, married, and has two preschool-age children. This is her fourth year as layperson in ministry with the congregation’s senior and junior high youth through UMYF, and Sandra has developed very close relationships with many of the youth. Hamstead Hills’ parents are pleased that the youth group is growing under her leadership, and they appreciate Sandra’s willingness to be available to her youth-group members any time of day or night via telephone, text, or e-mail, and many youth do confide in her and call her at “odd hours” about their personal problems. Sandra is also very affectionate with the boys, especially, often greeting them with a full-body hug and kiss whenever they meet, to make them feel loved, she explains. In the church youth lounge, she is often found sitting on the sofa next to one or more of the youth, holding hands or giving back rubs. The youth consider her to be a friend...

Donald is a dynamic and charismatic senior pastor of Church of the Magdalene UMC, a large, urban congregation. During the past five years of his fifteen-year ministry at Magdalene, three laywomen in his congregation—Nancy, Carol, and Johanna—have gone to the bishop with accusations that Donald has acted inappropriately with them. Each independently tells the bishop that Donald repeatedly groped, kissed, and fondled her in the church office. When confronted by the bishop, Donald defends himself, claiming that ladies in the church are often attracted to him, that this is not the first time he has been accused by jealous women unable to lure him from his wife, and that his award-winning record of evangelism for the past twenty-five years speaks for itself.

The bishop feels that her hands are tied since Donald will neither confirm nor deny the allegations and none of the women is willing to sign an official complaint out of fear of reprisal. In fact, Donald *has* done the things the women accuse him of, but he thinks that he is entitled to sexual favors since he “sacrifices so much” for the church . . .

Each of these scenarios depicts a case of sexual misconduct by a ministerial leader. All three are based on actual complaints and subsequent investigation of those complaints by United Methodist officials. In each case, some violation of church law or, at least, recommended professional boundaries has been violated. Sometimes the violation is unintentional, the result of a wanderer crossing interpersonal boundaries without an adequate awareness that such action is inappropriate and harmful. At other times, the violation is a deliberate exploitation of another person’s vulnerability for one’s own gratification, i.e., the act of a sexual predator. In all of these cases, real harm is done to individuals, family members, congregations, colleagues, and communities, under the guise of ministry. Sexual misconduct is a failure to uphold the minimal ethical standards of ministry.

DATA AND DEFINITIONS

Misconduct of a sexual nature is an ongoing problem in the church. A comprehensive, national study by the Baylor University School of Social Work in 2009 found that 3 percent of women attending church in the past month reported being sexually harassed or abused by a clergyman at some point in their adult lives.¹ Studies show that 90 percent of sexual misconduct involves male pastors victimizing female congregants.² Judicatory leaders in The United Methodist Church respond to hundreds of cases of misconduct of a sexual nature every year. The UMC averages between 140 and 500 cases of

¹ Diana Garland, “The Prevalence of Clergy Sexual Misconduct with Adults: A Research Study Executive Summary” (2009), <http://www.baylor.edu/clergysexualmisconduct/index.php?id=67406>.

² Beth Ann Gaede and Candace Reed Benyei, *When a Congregation Is Betrayed: Responding to Clergy Misconduct* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), x.

clergy sexual misconduct annually in the United States alone.³ At the time of this writing, I know of one person currently working with victims in 15 different cases in her annual conference, some of which go back over a decade. The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women provides support and advocacy for dozens of alleged victims of misconduct every year, representing only a fraction of cases across our Methodist connection.

As a denomination, the United Methodist Church has done much to address the problem of ministerial misconduct of a sexual nature. Our ministries of education, prevention, intervention, and healing are much stronger in 2010 than they were even five years ago. Misconduct of a sexual nature is a sin that we are still learning to address. However, we will never be able to eliminate sin in the church. What we can do is recognize it, name it, and hold persons in ministerial leadership accountable to clear standards of ethics so that when violations do occur, the church is able to right itself again through truth-telling, justice, and healing. We must be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” as we work to make the church a safer and more faithful place of ministry.

Professional ethics for ministry focuses on moral obligations arising from the sacred trust of the ministerial relationship and the fiduciary duty to protect the best interests of those we serve. According to the UMC:

Sexual misconduct is a betrayal of sacred trust. It is a continuum of unwanted sexual or gender-directed behaviors by either a lay or clergy person within a ministerial relationship (paid or unpaid). It can include child abuse, adult sexual abuse, harassment, rape or sexual assault, sexualized verbal comments or visuals, unwelcome touching and advances, use of sexualized materials including pornography, stalking, sexual abuse of youth or those without capacity to consent, or misuse of the pastoral or ministerial position using sexualized conduct to take advantage of the vulnerability of another. . . .

Sexual abuse is a form of sexual misconduct and occurs when a person within a ministerial role of leadership (lay or clergy, pastor, educator, counselor, youth leader, or other position of leadership) engages in sexual contact or sexualized

³ The UMC has no central reporting mechanism and compiles no aggregate data for the number of incidents of sexual misconduct that occur within this denomination. Statistical estimates are based on surveys and phone interviews by Sally Badgley Dolch, “Healing the Breach: Response Team Intervention in United Methodist Congregations” (DMIN, Wesley Theological Seminary, 2010), 131–32.

behavior with a congregant, client, employee, student, staff member, coworker, or volunteer.⁴

This definition covers anyone in church leadership, not just clergy, and it describes a spectrum of objectionable actions, including those exemplified by Jerome, Sandra, and Donald.

Each of the above cases studies depicts a leader who violated the trust of ministry through sexual behavior with a congregant. Donald is a sexual predator. He feels entitled to sex from his female parishioners, and he evades responsibility for his actions when confronted by the bishop. It is easy to understand his behavior as unethical and to see the wrong in his actions. Jerome, on the other hand, is not a predator. In fact, some people may have difficulty understanding his actions as misconduct at all. After all, weren't his parishioners encouraging him and Marjorie to date? The case of Sandra depicts a ministerial leader whose lack of clearly defined interpersonal boundaries creates emotional confusion and puts her and the youth in her care at risk. She may be a wanderer or a predator. We cannot tell from this short description. All of these ministerial leaders put the needs of self ahead of the needs of those to whom they are ministering.

SACRED TRUST

Sacred trust refers to a fundamental ethical obligation of the ministerial leader. All Christians are called through baptism to ministry. The gift of ministry comes from God. The task of ministry is entrusted to individuals. Some Christians are called by God and confirmed by the faith community as having the gifts and graces for representative ministry. Ministerial leaders may be lay or ordained and serve in countless roles, such as Sunday school teachers, bus drivers, musicians, and preachers. These leadership roles indicate the trust of a faith community and obligate the persons in those roles to uphold this trust. The sacred trust of ministry demands, at a minimum, that ministerial leaders will act in the best interests of those whom they serve.

Fiduciary duty is the legal term summarizing this professional obligation not to exploit others to our own advantage. Ministry, along with all other helping professions, shares this duty. Doctors, lawyers, social workers, teachers, law-enforcement officers— each of these professions accepts a responsibility to promote the best interests of others rather than self. Misconduct of a sexual nature is never simply an “affair”; rather, it is a violation of the power and authority of the professional role. A lawyer, for instance, has a duty to act in the

⁴ “Sexual Misconduct within Ministerial Relationships,” *The Book of Resolutions 2008*, 134–35.

best interests of her client and to refrain from using that relationship to personal advantage. In the medical profession, the obligation to “do no harm” is expressed in the classic formulation of the Hippocratic oath. For clergy and others in ministerial roles, this duty emerges from thousands of years of theological tradition.

The Holy Bible is replete with messages about justice and faithful ministry. The predominant theme of justice in the Hebrew Bible is protection of the vulnerable, those without power.⁵ King David exemplified the leader who misuses power for personal gratification. When Nathan said to David, “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7), he voiced God’s judgment on David’s misuse of his office to exploit Bathsheba and her husband. Ezekiel brought sharp condemnation on so-called shepherds who would prey on their own flock: “You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (Ezekiel 34:4).

In the New Testament, Jesus warns, “Just as you did [not do] it to one of the least of these, you did [not do] it to me” (Matthew 25:45), implying that our behavior in ministry to others is a reflection of how we would treat Jesus himself. Paul counsels those in ministry: “Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other” (1 Corinthians 10:24). Through our United Methodist liturgy of baptism, the community of faith pledges to “live according to the example of Christ” and to “surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God.” Misconduct of a sexual nature is a violation of this love and trust, taking advantage of vulnerable people who entrust their lives and souls to the care of the church and its ministers. Sexual misconduct is an abuse of power, a violation of professional boundaries, and an exploitation of persons incapable of genuine consent.

POWER (DONALD) ⁶

Power and its abuse are a key factor in ministerial misconduct, but many clergy are genuinely confused when discussions of professional ethics focus on the concept of power. A common response of a pastor striving to exemplify “servant leadership” is, “I don’t *feel* powerful.” However, power in a ministerial relationship is not dependent on how I may feel as a clergyperson. The power of the ministerial role is a reality we can and must learn to

⁵ For a helpful explanation of the concept of justice in the Bible, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Justice, Not Charity: Social Work through the Eyes of Faith,” *Social Work & Christianity* 33, no. 2 (2006), http://www.nacsw.org/Publications/SWC33_2WebSample.pdf.

⁶ For an excellent discussion on power and vulnerability in ministry, see Marie M. Fortune, *Responding to Clergy Misconduct: A Handbook*, 1st ed. (Seattle: FaithTrust Institute, 2009), 41-45.

perceive and recognize. Ministerial power is independent of the individual who occupies the role. A quick example may help.

Recently, I was in a hurry to arrive at an out-of-town church meeting with some high-level conference leaders. Already running late, I found myself speeding down the highway, trying to make up for lost time. Soon, a police siren blared, and flashing lights shone in my rearview mirror. An officer pulled me over. When he approached the driver's side door, he asked me if I knew why he had stopped me. "Yes," I admitted, "I was going too fast." As he checked my license and took out his clipboard, he asked me where I was headed. His inquiry seemed to be an opportunity for me to share my story, to connect on a human level, and to appeal to his sense of compassion. On that particular day, nothing about me indicated that I am clergy or that I was headed to a church meeting. Suddenly, I was faced with a moral dilemma. How much information do I volunteer to this police officer? Is he inviting me to share a valid excuse for breaking the law? If I simply tell him, "I'm late for a meeting" and offer no other explanation, a ticket is more likely than a warning. On the other hand, if I tell him my clergy status and that I am on my way to a church meeting, would this be construed as an attempt to use my clergy status to influence the law? What if he were to let me off with a warning after learning that I am a "man of the cloth"? What would *you* do? If my status as clergy is powerful enough to influence a person who is not part of my congregation—in this case, a police officer with legitimate and indisputable cause to write me a speeding ticket—how much more influence do I wield among my own parishioners? The ability to influence people and their behaviors is a powerful aspect of ministry.

The role of ministerial leader is one factor among many that may determine power dynamics between persons. Age, race/ethnicity, gender, wealth, education, citizenship status, and language all play a part in the amount of influence and vulnerability we experience with others. The context of the relationship is also a major factor. When clergy interact with a congregant, the role of the ministerial leader is a primary factor in determining the relative power between them. People bring their most intimate concerns to those in ministerial leadership, trusting that they have the training, expertise, and sensitivity to understand the human condition and to speak a word of divine grace and forgiveness. In short, they are entrusted to care for people's deepest needs, hurts, desires, and hopes. The title "pastor" or status of "clergy" often functions as a seal of approval that they are trustworthy in this way. Many clergy have had the experience of being trusted by complete strangers. Imagine my being on an airplane next to some friendly person who asks, "So, what do you do?" After learning of my clergy status, my seat-neighbor then proceeds to share details of her divorce proceedings, upcoming surgery, theodicy struggles, or other spiritual concerns. Why does

this stranger feel comfortable sharing intimate details of her life with me and to seek my advice and counsel? The trust extended to clergy extends far beyond my own parish. This is a powerful position to be in.

In the third scenario above, Donald is a pastor who abuses his power, taking advantage of his parishioners for his own satisfaction. He exemplifies the dangerous pastor to whom Ezekiel speaks a word of judgment. Or as Nathan might say to him, “Donald, you are the man!” Donald feels entitled to act the way he does toward the women in his congregation, and he leverages his evangelical effectiveness and prowess as a preacher to deflect criticism. His power derives not only from his role as pastor but also from his political influence in the conference. In this instance, he exerts his power by pressuring Nancy, Carol, and Johanna not to file signed complaints and pressuring his bishop to let the matter drop. He is a dangerous manipulator who casts himself as the victim, claiming to be the “vulnerable” party.

The term *vulnerability* refers to a relative lack of power and resources.⁷ As with power, vulnerability is not dependent on the way someone feels. Clergy may feel “vulnerable” when striving to model sensitivity, openness, or servant leadership, but this feeling does not indicate a lack of power. On the contrary, many clergy are empowered to display a great degree of emotional and spiritual openness with their congregations precisely because of their role and the institutional resources available to them. Having a lot to lose is an indication of power, not powerlessness. In Donald’s case, he has a twenty-five-year career, a large-steeple pulpit, and a public image at stake (in addition to his marriage and family life). To protect himself and his personal interests, he spuriously claims to be vulnerable while leveraging tremendous institutional resources to have his way.

This is not to say that clergy can never be the victims of harassment and abuse. Young women clergy, in particular, can be vulnerable to harassment and abuse by male laypersons, especially those whose age, race, wealth, and other social factors provide them with relatively more powerful positions.⁸ Even in these situations, though, the person in the ministerial role is responsible for maintaining appropriate professional boundaries.

INTERPERSONAL BOUNDARIES IN MINISTRY (SANDRA)

Professional relationships are characterized in part by appropriate interpersonal boundaries. Boundaries describe the scope and appropriate limits within a ministerial

⁷ Marie M. Fortune, *Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 42.

⁸ As of 2009, every U.S. annual conference is required to adopt policies addressing such a circumstance: *The Book of Discipline 2008*, par. 605.8.

relationship. When a clergyperson interacts with a person in her congregation, she represents more than herself. She represents the congregation, the institutional church, the profession of ministry, and even God. When she dons the “collar” (either literally or figuratively), she functions in a public role with public expectations. She does not act on her own behalf. This is true whether leading public worship or providing one-to-one spiritual guidance. This is also true of laity in ministerial leadership roles: choir directors, Sunday school teachers, and adult volunteers with the youth group all occupy ministerial roles. Observing and honoring appropriate boundaries allow ministerial leaders to uphold the covenant of expectation placed upon those roles. The sacred trust of ministry is built on the assurance of limits.

Professional relationships differ from personal relationships in the degree of reciprocity. Ministerial relationships are asymmetrical: the pastor is there to serve the needs of the parishioner (fiduciary duty), not the other way around. The pastor is expected to provide certain services and expertise and to have the appropriate training and institutional accountability to carry out her duties. The parishioner expects that the pastor has other outlets to satisfy her own needs. Personal relationships, on the other hand, are more mutual and less well-defined. Friendships are built on the expectation of being there for each other. The mutuality of friendship means personal sharing back and forth and mutual support. Sexual intimacy, for example, should be characterized by mutuality and reciprocity. Not so the relationship between pastor and parishioner.

The appropriate boundaries within ministerial relationships depend on culture and context to some degree. They are not rigid rules but rather must be adapted and examined again and again. Different cultures have distinct expectations for appropriate physical and emotional boundaries. Even the most basic interactions, such as a conversation between two people in a public place, are governed by many tacit rules of interaction. Anyone who’s ever talked to a person from a culture with a smaller radius of personal space knows the uncomfortable feeling of an interpersonal boundary being violated. In some cultures, it is customary to stand very close to the other person while talking. This disconcerting proximity causes me to take a step backward to reestablish the space to which I am accustomed. My interlocutor then steps forward to reestablish his usual interpersonal distance. This difference must be constantly negotiated as our conversation continues. Boundaries in ministry are similarly culturally defined, to some degree, and must be negotiated and renegotiated within our faith communities.

If boundaries are somewhat flexible and context dependent, what, then, can we say about what is appropriate or inappropriate? Several moral tests can guide us. (See [Appendix A](#).) First, the bullhorn test: how would my actions as a ministerial leader be perceived if they

were made public? This might also be called a *test of transparency*. A second question is, whose needs are being met? This is the test of *fiduciary duty*. Are my actions as a ministerial leader in the best interests of the congregant? Or am I attempting to have my own, personal needs met through this relationship? A third question is, what ministerial service am I providing? Providing emotional and spiritual support during difficult times is a genuine, *legitimate function of ministry*. On the other hand, sexual intimacy is not a service of the profession of ministry! A fourth test is *collegial accountability and supervision*. How do my supervisor and colleagues respond when I report my behavior as a ministerial leader? Note: If I am unwilling to honestly depict and share my behavior with them, I have failed the bullhorn test, above. Fifth, who is put at risk by my actions? This is the “*do no harm*” test. Sixth, how might my behavior be misperceived? This is the test of *staying above reproach*, avoiding the appearance of impropriety. Seventh, how important or indispensable do I feel in this relationship? Do I feel that I am the only person who can attend to these spiritual needs? Or am I just filling a role in this person’s life at this time?

Effective ministry is not about me as a clergyperson. The feeling of being personally needed by others is a powerful form of dependency, and it can go in both directions. Eighth, does the person being ministered to exhibit signs of emotional dependence on the minister? This is the companion to guideline 7. Ninth, what kind of precedent am I setting? This is about the culture of ministry in a particular congregation. I am not a sexual predator; I know that when alone with a congregant, I will not take sexual advantage of that person. However, if I create a congregational culture that routinely accepts ministerial behavior that could put others at risk, then I set a precedent that enables a future predator easy access to vulnerable parishioners. Tenth, am I being seduced by the feeling of “exception”? Do I feel that somehow this ministerial relationship is an exception to the usual rules and limits? If I think that this relationship is different, unique, or special in a way that allows me to justify crossing the usual boundaries, I am at risk of self-deception. If I think that these guidelines don’t apply in my situation, I am at great risk of misconduct. My colleagues and supervisor should alert me to this danger, if I am observing guideline 4, above. These guidelines are not set in stone; they do not by themselves determine if I am guilty of misconduct. However, failure to follow any of these guidelines is a red-flag warning of possible boundary violations.⁹

Sandra’s case raises several red flags. Her availability 24/7 by phone, e-mail, and other communication technologies indicates a lack of boundaries and the danger of self-importance. Sandra’s actions indicate that she perceives herself as indispensable to the youth

⁹ For a similar treatment of the ambiguities of the moral terrain of ministry, from an evangelical Christian Realist perspective, see Rebekah Miles, *The Pastor as Moral Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

she serves. Her physical affection with the youth raises the question of her intentions. We don't know how the male youth perceive her hugs and kisses, nor do we know how others in the congregation perceive her behavior. However, a reasonable person might have cause to wonder what is going on. Sandra is behaving in ways that could be easily misperceived, if indeed her actions are innocent. She has fallen into the danger of the appearance of impropriety. Sandra is also acting in ways that indicate she may be trying to meet her own needs for intimacy, touch, and friendship through her ministerial relationships. She is not keeping the best interests of her youth primary. This is a violation of fiduciary duty.

Sandra's behavior is also questionable as professional conduct. Are kisses, back rubs, and hand-holding legitimate services of ministry? There are certainly contexts when these actions could be an appropriate part of ministerial support: comforting someone in a hospital, during grieving at a funeral, etc. However, Sandra uses physical intimacy as an everyday tool of ministry. She may also be causing harm to others if some of the teenagers develop unhealthy emotional and physical attachments to her.

Finally, Sandra's behavior is creating a congregational culture conducive to future misconduct by others. The youth and other congregants are being trained to accept as normal some very unhealthy ministerial practices. Would the congregation be as accepting of a male youth minister behaving in the same way? She has set a bad precedent for ministry. These guidelines do not establish clear "guilt" in terms of sexual misconduct by Sandra. However, the multiple warning signs indicate a situation that could easily lead to misconduct if it has not occurred already.

ABSENCE OF CONSENT (JEROME)

Consent is a prerequisite to acceptable sexual intimacy in U.S. culture, but a ministerial relationship is a context in which meaningful consent by the parishioner is often impossible. Consent is not only the ability to say yes but also the ability to say no. Because of the authority of the clergyperson, the disparate power between pastor and parishioner, and the vulnerability of the parishioner, sexual contact within a ministerial relationship often lacks true consent even if the parishioner seems to agree to it. When it comes to sexual intimacy, there is no meaningful consent possible between the minister and the person seeking pastoral care.¹⁰ This type of dual relationship is incompatible with ministry and is often indicative of poor habits of self-care.

¹⁰ The concept of "meaningful consent" is based on the ability of each party to say no, without fear of reprisal. Consent is maximized in a relationship of equals. The ability of the more vulnerable party in a relationship to consent to sexual activity is diminished as the power differential increases. In a fiduciary relationship, the professional is trusted not to exploit the

Dual relationships are common in ministry. Unlike other professions, such as psychiatrists, clergy cannot categorically avoid friendships with those they serve. Nor would they want to. Because pastors live and work within a community, they often have multiple relationships with the persons in their pews. The pastor might buy books at the store owned by a parishioner, the pastor's dentist might join the church and desire to be baptized, and the pastor's children might attend school taught by men and women who sing in the choir or serve on the board of trustees. Pastors have many different kinds of relationships with the persons in their congregations. Entering into responsible dual relationships requires intentional and often explicit negotiation of appropriate boundaries. For example, my doctor might tell me, "Rev. Stephens, I'll attend your church as long as you only ask me for medical advice during scheduled appointments in my medical office." Likewise, I would expect that Dr. Fisher would not spend time during my annual physical exam seeking pastoral advice about his personal issues. Boundaries help us respect each other's profession, time, and privacy.

Clergy often have to work harder than other professions to establish and maintain the boundaries appropriate to their dual relationships because the work of ministry is not typically confined to office hours by appointment in a designated place of ministry. When a doctor and her patient coincidentally find themselves at the same grocery store, the doctor is clearly "off duty" and would not appreciate a spontaneous request for a medical opinion. However, when a pastor is grocery shopping, this might be an integral activity necessary to effective ministry in that community. It might be an occasion to offer invitation, assurance, and spiritual support. Indeed, the challenge for clergy is how to take time off. How can clergy set aside time and opportunity to attend to their own needs?

Self-care for clergy and other ministerial leaders is vital to a healthy work/life balance and appropriate boundaries in ministry. In order to be fully present for and to attend to the best interests of those they serve, ministerial leaders must also have personal time and personal relationships that allow their own needs to be met. If clergy attempted to be in ministry all of the time with everyone who enters their lives, they would do themselves and others a great disservice. They would inevitably begin using their ministerial relationships to satisfy their personal needs. Self-care for clergy means, at the least, taking a day off every week, turning off phone and e-mail at certain times of day, and cultivating friendships with persons completely removed from their ministerial setting. Considering their own sexual

imbalance in power to his/her own advantage. On the lack of meaningful consent to sexual intimacy in ministerial relationships, see Fortune, *Responding to Clergy Misconduct*, 28, 49–50; Karen Lebacqz and Ronald G. Barton, *Sex in the Parish*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1991), 113–31; Karen A. McClintock, *Preventing Sexual Abuse in Congregations: A Resource for Leaders* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 78–82.

needs, clergy must recognize that they cannot be a person's lover and pastor at the same time.¹¹

Jerome's case illustrates some of the complexities of dating for clergy. He and Marjorie clearly have a ministerial relationship: she joined the church under his leadership, and he has served as her pastor for two years. This relationship precedes their dating relationship chronologically and takes priority for Jerome even after their romantic liaison commences. What may appear to be a consensual relationship involving sexual intimacy between two adults is most likely not a relationship to which Marjorie is free to consent.

The guidelines above offer several red-flag warnings for Jerome. Jerome fails the bullhorn test. His effort to keep their dating relationship secret is an indication of lack of transparency. There is also no evidence that he is seeking collegial support and supervision. He fails the accountability test. Jerome is also operating as if his relationship were an exception to the dangers inherent in dating a parishioner, indicating the danger of self-deception. Jerome still maintains the façade of a pastoral relationship with Marjorie even as they begin dating. Clearly, he has prioritized his own needs over the fiduciary responsibility he owes to her. Furthermore, who is being put at risk in this situation? Examining this dual relationship closely reveals that Jerome is putting Marjorie at more risk than he is willing to assume himself. If this romance encounters rocky terrain, to whom can Marjorie turn for pastoral support? Clearly she would need to turn to someone other than Jerome. Jerome's primary role in her life has changed from pastor to lover. However, it is not at all clear from Jerome's behavior that he shares this priority. Otherwise, he would be more transparent about and accountable for his actions. Marjorie has already lost a pastor, and Jerome has not helped her find a new one. The congregation is also being put at risk. When a romance goes sour, people take sides. What would happen to this congregation if this couple had a messy breakup? In many actual cases, the congregation becomes divided and community is significantly ruptured.

How could this dating scenario be improved so as to reduce the risks and increase accountability?¹² First, Jerome should acknowledge that he can't be both pastor and lover to Marjorie. If they desire an amorous relationship, one or both of them will have to find a new church. Second, transparency requires that Jerome and Marjorie be public about this dating relationship. Jerome should contact his district superintendent for guidance, and he should

¹¹ See Fortune, *Love Does No Harm*, 83–84.

¹² Karen Lebacqz and Ronald G. Barton caution that the burden of proof is on the pastor to demonstrate that the relationship is genuinely consensual and that the couple are meeting as equals and that the context of sexism in U.S. culture renders a relationship between a male pastor and a female congregant unlikely to be free of power and coercion (*Sex in the Parish*, 130).

alert the staff-parish relations committee. Third, these parties along with some trusted colleagues should hold him accountable to his professional duties and help him establish safeguards to reduce the possibility of doing harm to others. Fourth, he will have to work carefully to avoid normalizing this behavior in the life of the congregation. If the congregation comes to accept the situation of their pastor dating a parishioner as normal, Jerome will be setting a precedent that may prove destructive to healthy ministry. If single women joining this church thought that they were being viewed as potential dating partners for the pastor, wouldn't this detrimentally affect the ability of the pastor to minister to them?

One of the most disturbing aspects of this scenario, even if these safeguards were put into place, is the likelihood that Marjorie is not really free to genuinely consent to sexual intimacy with Jerome. She joined this congregation immediately after a difficult divorce. If she has worked through her grieving of the end of this marriage, it is likely that this church and its pastor, Jerome, played a significant part in providing spiritual support. This would have increased the power imbalance already inherent in the ministerial relationship. If, on the other hand, she has not worked through her grief, she is even more vulnerable on an emotional level. The ability to genuinely consent to a sexual relationship decreases in proportion to the depth of pastoral relationship. For this reason, some states have criminalized clergy sexual misconduct in certain circumstances, meaning that Jerome could be arrested for having sex with Marjorie if he had already established a relationship of pastoral care with her.¹³

CONCLUSION

Upholding the sacred trust of ministry requires leaders who are attuned to the complicated dynamics of power, interpersonal boundaries, and consent within ministerial relationships. At the heart of the ethical obligation of ministry is fiduciary duty—a commitment by all persons in ministerial roles of leadership to act in the best interests of those whom they serve. Failure to observe prudent safeguards and to avoid common dangers puts many people at risk. Faithfulness to ethical standards of ministry creates safer and healthier congregational communities, enabling the church to more fully live out its call to be Christ for the world.

¹³ Bradley J. B. Toben and Kris Helge. "Sexual Misconduct of Clergypersons with Congregants or Parishioners: Civil and Criminal Liabilities and Responsibilities." <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/96096.pdf>.

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All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version.

APPENDIX A: GUIDELINES FOR PROFESSIONAL ETHICS: AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

Safeguards

1. Bullhorn test (transparency; avoiding secrecy)
2. Parishioner's needs (fiduciary duty)
3. Service of ministry (legitimate professional activity)
4. Collegial support and supervision (accountability)
5. Reduce risk (do no harm)

Dangers

6. Misperception (avoiding appearance of impropriety)
7. Self-importance (avoid becoming dependent)
8. Dependence (avoid creating and fostering dependence)
9. Unhealthy precedent (avoid normalizing questionable practices)
10. Self-deception (avoid the "exception" delusion)

Reductionist Models

By William L. White

In my involvement in professional organizations over the past thirty years, I have observed six reductionist models that have explicitly or implicitly guided attempts to prevent or intervene in episodes of misconduct of a sexual nature by professional helpers.

1. The Perpetrator Morality Model
2. The “Victim” Morality Model
3. The Clinical Model
4. The Anomie Model
5. The Training Model
6. The Environmental Model

After sharing origins and intervention strategies of each of these reductionist models, I will outline the systems model, which integrates the best of these reductionist models into a whole, so that a framework for such wholeness can be sought and achieved.

In the **Perpetrator Morality Model**, the misconduct is viewed as emerging from the evilness of the perpetrating clergy. It is assumed that only a person totally lacking superego controls—in short, a psychopathic predator—could so exploit the sacred trust. Our task is to screen out these evil people and keep them from entering the clergy and our churches. Our further task is to find these persons who fooled us and remove them from positions of responsibility in the church.

This model has general appeal because it can occasionally be found, and when we label and treat persons as sexual psychopaths, it magnifies the distance between us and the perpetrator. It allows us to believe, for example, that, because we see no such exploitive tendencies in ourselves, we are not vulnerable to sexual involvements with parishioners—a belief that probably increases our chances of being involved in just such a relationship. It allows organizations, such as the church, to believe that they have addressed the problem of misconduct of a sexual nature solely by removing an identified sexual predator.

The second model is closely related to the first but defines the source of evilness not within the alleged perpetrator but within the alleged victim. The **“Victim” Morality Model** denies the reality of the misconduct and casts the problem within the character of the victim. It is believed that the victim/complainant misinterpreted the intentions or actions of the perpetrator or is retaliating with false allegations of personal animosity. Another version of

this model portrays the complainant as seductive and manipulative and one who overwhelms the otherwise ethical clergy.

If this belief permeates the Church, the Church will be notorious for scapegoating the complainant. Even if the Church has clear policies and grievance procedures related to misconduct of a sexual nature, hearings are often turned into a systematic indictment of the complainant. It becomes a vehicle for revictimization. Like the dangers for children breaking silence about sexual abuse, the dangers of revictimization for other victims are equally great. The scapegoating and revictimization of persons who have broken silence deepens the silence of other victims and also protects perpetrators from experiencing the consequences of the actions. It is a way to ignore the call to justice and compassion.

In the **Clinical Model**, the origins of misconduct of a sexual nature are defined in terms of psychopathology. The misconduct is viewed as transient aberrations in judgment that have emerged from chronic or transient emotional disturbance. The model is seen in religious leaders—when efforts to escape charges fail—running off to alcoholic or psychiatric treatment centers with the underlying explanation that the abuses of power resulted from a crisis.

The Clinical Model dictates one or two responses to the identified perpetrator. Where such emotional disturbance is validated by clinical assessment and is adjudged to preclude the clergy's ability to perform his or her ministerial office, the person is removed from the ministry setting through either suspension or surrender of credentials. In other cases, when the clergy's impairment is not so severe or enduring as to preclude professional performance, the person is restricted to only particular types of professional activity and is mandated to continue in some form of treatment. The Clinical Model applied to the ministry posits that persons must screen out those whose emotional instability precludes their ability to work with vulnerable persons. It also posits that effective programs for early intervention must be in place to intervene at an early stage before the health and safety of the parishioners are involved. There is also an assumption that some perpetrators can be treated and returned to ministerial roles with minimal risks of future exploitive incidents. This model, like some of the others, may contain elements of the true story of misconduct of a sexual nature, but fails to capture the whole story.

There is a variation of the Clinical Model that defines the problem in terms of the complainant's psychopathology. The misconduct is interpreted as delusion, fantasy, a transference problem, or a retribution for "imaged slights by the borderline personality." In some complaints, the initial presentation of the allegation is framed more as a clinical case study of the victim/survivor than an administrative hearing to determine fact regarding an

allegation. One problem in this regard is that the most insidious sexual perpetrator is going to select victims that include those persons who have the greatest vulnerability and whose complaint would be most easily discounted.

The fourth reductionist model of sexual exploitation is the **Anomie Model**. This model, which is often found in new emerging disciplines and organizations (or those going through turbulent changes), defines the origin of misconduct of a sexual nature as the absence of clear ethic standards for defining appropriate and inappropriate conduct. The source of the problem is the lack of definition of standards of appropriateness in service relationships. With this model, our task is to generate codes of conduct that define appropriate and inappropriate behavior within these relationships.

When organizations have created standards and continue to have problems with misconduct, it is time to redefine the problem. The **Training Model** defines the origin in terms of the knowledge and skill deficiency of the clergy—it is a problem of inadequate professional socialization. The solution for helping clergy is to provide preparatory and ongoing training in ethical standards and ethical decision making for all clergy and targeted training designed to rehabilitate the clergy who have been involved in poor boundary maintenance in their relationship with parishioners.

The sixth reductionist model, the **Environmental Model**, defines the origin as an isolated aberration (abnormality) of chemistry between the perpetrator and the environment at a particular point in time. This model argues that since this event was idiosyncratic and unlikely to ever occur again in a different context, the best strategy is to move the perpetrator to another role, department, church, or geographical location. The same logic could justify transferring the victim's membership to another church. While the church has been visibly criticized for moving pedophile priests from parish to parish, many other organizations have been involved in the same practice.

Reductionist models of explanation and intervention, which are central in the early stages of exploring any problem, must eventually give way to models that can encompass complexity and diversity. All of the models described above tend to define the problem of misconduct of a sexual nature in ways that narrow our view of its origins and restrict our vision of prevention and intervention strategies. Some are based on errors of fact. Others describe an element of the problem but do not encompass the problem. Our task is to integrate the best within these models into a coherent whole. The goal of the systems model outlined below is to provide a framework through which such wholeness can be sought and achieved.

SYSTEMS MODEL

The systems model begins by defining the problem of misconduct of a sexual nature as a breakdown in a relationship. It is the breakdown in the fiduciary (trust) relationship that exists between the clergy/church and parishioner. This breakdown occurs when certain elements necessary to the success of the relationship get lost and certain new elements get injected. What gets lost in the minister-parishioner relationship are respect and integrity; what gets injected into the relationship are the manipulation and abuse of power. The factors and conditions that lead to both the loss and the injection are multiple and synergistic in their interaction. Prevention and intervention strategies must understand and target these multiple influences. *A systems model provides a conceptual map within which the existing data and viewpoints can be linked together and within which understandings of new complexities can be integrated.*

Four propositions help introduce this systems perspective:

- Proposition One Misconduct of a sexual nature can best be viewed as a process rather than an event.
- Proposition Two The process of misconduct of a sexual nature is ecologically nested (interrelated) with professional, organizational, community, and cultural environments. These elements of influence can serve to promote or inhibit boundary violations in the clergy-parishioner relationship.
- Proposition Three Strategies and programs to address the misconduct must reflect an in-depth understanding of dynamics through which organizations resist and experience change over time.
- Proposition Four A change in one part of the system produces accommodating changes in all other parts of the system, raising the potential for unforeseen problems created by an attempt at problem resolution.

Proposition One

Misconduct of a sexual nature can at best be viewed as a process rather than an event.

Sexually exploiting behaviors often exist on a continuum of disrespectful, demeaning, and/or discriminatory behaviors. Misconduct of a sexual nature is often the last stage of what has been a progressive violation of intimacy barriers in the clergy-parishioner relationship. Allegations are often a breaking into light of what has been a progressive deterioration in the integrity of the relationship. The helping relationship could be displayed on a continuum of intimacy. At one end of this continuum is the complete physical and emotional disengagement; at the other is a high level of emotional and physical intimacy. Somewhere in the middle, depending on the nature of the organization, our role, and the nature of those we serve, a zone of appropriateness will mark the boundaries of appropriate intimacy.

This concept can help us first develop a deeper understanding of the experience of victimization that results from misconduct. The trauma from sexual exploitation results from the entire continuum of boundary violations, not just the overt sexual acts; the parishioner may be traumatized, but lack the ability to clearly label his or her exploitation. In family and therapeutic relationships, this is sometimes described as emotional incest. The concept of continuum also suggests that violations that may also be traumatic can occur at the other end. Many case studies of exploitation, in fact, involve violation of both ends of the continuum—sexual exploitation followed by precipitous termination and abandonment of the parishioner. Clergy should be held as accountable for the latter as for the former.

The understanding of this proposition is also critical to effective strategy development. The fact that sexual exploitation is often preceded by a progression of other boundary violations provides a window of opportunity to both identify boundary problems at an early stage and potentially prevent more severe transgressions in the ministerial relationship. Sexual exploitation of parishioners cannot be dealt with in isolation but must be addressed within broader context of abuses of power that occur at both ends of the intimacy continuum.

Proposition Two

The process of misconduct of a sexual nature is ecologically nested (interrelated) within professional, organizational, community, and cultural environments. These elements of influence can serve to promote or inhibit boundary violations in the clergy-parishioner relationship.

There are two major implications of this proposition. The first is that the identification of forces at all levels of this ecosystem that promote or fail to inhibit the misconduct must be identified. The second implication is that our prevention and remediation strategies must target multiple sites within the ecosystem. The layers of this ecosystem will be described shortly.

Proposition Three

Strategies and programs to address the misconduct must reflect an in-depth understanding of dynamics through which organizations resist and experience change over time.

Organizations tend to respond to crises and demands for change with responses that minimize real change. If boundary problems with parishioners and misconduct of a sexual nature in particular, become an issue generated internally or through the decree of some external body, the organization's first efforts are likely to be superficial and mechanistic. An individual worker is removed. Something extra is added—a policy, a person, a training seminar—none of which is intended or likely by itself to alter the nature of the organizational culture.

In the cases of clergy misconduct of a sexual nature, one church/conference acquires another church/conference ethics policy, then replaces their name and with minimal involvement from anyone sticks it in a policy manual that few will ever read. The complaint procedure and mechanism is quickly manufactured in a similar manner, and an outside trainer is brought in to do one-shot training for a group of clergy. The church feels it has responded to the problem of clergy misconduct of a sexual nature. This is not how a church changes; this is how a church avoids change.

This inherent resistance to change in most human systems suggests that efforts to address serious problems often result in superficial rather than systemic change. Our response is to take some singular action or add some appendage to the system rather than change the culture *within* the system. It is easier to remove one sexual predator than to

confront an entire organizational (church) culture that has lost its mission and ministry focus or has become toxic and abusive.

Proposition Four

A change in one part of the system produces accommodating changes in all other parts of the system, raising the potential for unforeseen problems created by an attempt at problem resolution.

This proposition demands that organizations take extreme care in avoiding strategies that, while designed to protect parishioners, end up revictimizing or otherwise harming parishioners. In similar manner, we must avoid policies or procedures that, in protecting parishioners, fail to also protect the procedural rights (fair process) of the clergy.

THE ECOLOGY OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Microsystems, Mesosystems, Exosystems, Macrosystems

Systems perspectives can aid in strategy development by helping identify the multiple etiological roots of a problem, by setting a focus of intervention, and by elucidating the potential interaction of strategies at the same time or sequentially implemented within a dynamic system. The problem of misconduct of a sexual nature can, for example, be placed within an ecological framework. An event of misconduct involving a single perpetrator and a single complainant is viewed as occurring within an environment that is itself nested within a larger environment, and so forth. This model places the interaction of these two individuals at the center of this ecological onion. There may be things at each layer that contributed to the unfolding of this event and resources and strategies at each layer that may contribute to problem resolution.

The center of this model is ontogeny—the unique developmental histories of the perpetrator and the person(s) being exploited that brought them to this exact point in time. The systems model seeks to identify any characteristics or circumstances that contribute to either role. The purpose of such inquiry is not to psychologically excuse the perpetrator or blame the victim for his or her own victimization. Knowledge of the characteristics of the perpetrator and the victim and situational cues related to when, where, and how the misconduct occurred may help develop policies and structures that decrease the likelihood of such behavior. Perpetrator profiles may help remove persons with predatory proclivities from being appointed or may tell us the circumstances under which they may be high risk

for intimacy violations in their ministry. A better understanding of persons targeted for harassment could lead to the discovery of strategies to reduce parishioner vulnerability. If for example, it is discovered that the lack of knowledge of what is and is not appropriate within a ministerial relationship contributes to parishioner vulnerability, programs of parishioner orientation to such issues become a potential prevention strategy; if it is discovered that particular types of parishioners are being targeted, special systems of prevention, intervention, protection and support could be designed and implemented.

In addition to examining what each individual brings to the exploitive minister-parishioner relationship, the presence of any special chemistry in the relationship that seems unique to the exploitive event can also be explored. It seems that some clergy are vulnerable to boundary violations with only a particular type of parishioner. A greater understanding of such chemistry could help reduce minister and parishioner vulnerability by influencing how ministers are assigned to work with particular persons. It would also reveal particular types of minister-parishioner combinations that might be worthy of much more frequent and rigorous supervision.

The exploiting event occurs within physical, professional, and social environments. This second layer of our ecological onion is the *microsystem*—the smallest unit of the organization that surrenders each worker. The microsystem is a church, a ministry setting, a work team, a supervisor, a job description. The point of inquiry in the microsystem is an examination of forces or conditions in this environment that influence positively or negatively the incidence of misconduct of a sexual nature. Conducting this kind of analysis can generate a series of microsystems intervention strategies. The strategies seek to reduce the promoting forces and to strengthen the inhibiting forces. Microsystems strategies involve such areas as:

- parishioner education about boundary issues in the ministerial relationship
- parishioner access to grievance/complaint procedures
- training programs on ethical and boundary issues
- clergy access to clinical supervision of pastoral counseling
- access to internal resources of ministerial support
- access for the parishioner to external resources of support (advocacy services, personal/legal consultation, counseling, support groups)

Microsystems strategies also target the alleviation of roles stressors that may have contributed to the deterioration in boundaries, e.g., role overload, role-person mismatch, role ambiguity.

Each microsystem is ecologically nested with the *mesosystem*—the total organization that embraces and links all of the organizational units and defines their relationships with one another and the outside world. At the mesosystem level, one can examine how broad organization processes and structures either enhance or inhibit misconduct of a sexual nature. Mesosystem issues include things ranging from the existence, clarity, accessibility, and enforcement of policies and standards governing the ministerial-parishioner relationships, to the attitudes, values, and behaviors modeled by organizational leaders. Mesosystem strategies to address misconduct of a sexual nature are encompassed within ethics committees, quality improvement committees, and planning processes that seek to consciously shape the service culture of the organization. In the next section, two particular mesosystem issues will be explored in detail—the sexual culture of the organization and the propensity for abuse within closed organizational systems.

The examination of microsystem and mesosystem influences on misconduct recognizes that there is a dynamic relationship between what the minister and the parishioner brings to the organization and what the organization brings to these relationships. In the chemistry of this interaction, the propensity to exploit and the vulnerability to be exploited can be either decreased or increased. This step neither blames the organization nor removes the blame of responsibility from the clergy for his or her actions. It does acknowledge that organizations can play a contributing role by promoting or tolerating conditions that nurture misconduct or by failing to serve as an active restraining agent to misconduct of a sexual nature.

Each organization (its microsystems and its workers) is nested within a broader geographical, social, political, and economic environment (*exosystem*). There is a complex and continuing relationship between the organization and this immediate environment that influences the internal values and behavior within the organization. It is important for an organization, the church, to have understanding of the degree to which the values, attitudes, and entrenched behaviors within this exosystem will serve to enhance or inhibit misconduct within the ministerial setting. Where enhancing factors exist in great strength, the church may choose to link itself with other organizations in a campaign of community education designed to weaken such forces, or having an awareness of such external factors, intensify their internal programs to prevent misconduct. Through its political voice and through its trade associations, the church may also contribute to weakening such enhancing factors in broader culture (*macrosystem*).

The issue is not which one of these strategies is preferable. The issue is, how can these strategies be integrated with existing resources into a coordinated program that targets these multiple levels of intervention?

MESOSYSTEM AND MICROSYSTEM PROBLEMS

Organizational Culture: Boundaries Controlling the Expression of Power, Aggression Sexuality

With this broad overview in place, I will focus on three mesosystem and microsystems problems that have been a focus for my work:

- shaping nonexploitive organizational sexual cultures
- creating an organizational code of professional practice as the centerpiece of a value-driven, service-oriented organizational culture
- addressing the special problem of sexual exploitation of clients within closed organizational systems

One dimension of the microsystem and mesosystem environment that influences misconduct of a sexual nature is the culture of the organization and its work units. Every organization can be said to have a culture. Each organization's culture can be described in terms of its history, traditions, heroes and heroines, values, symbols, slogans, rituals, and taboos. Some can be described in terms of particular customs related to dress, food, leisure, music, and art. In a similar manner it can also be said that each organization has a sexual culture. The sexual culture defines the customs and etiquette that will guide professional and personal relationships between organizational members and between members and constituents. The sexual culture of an organization shapes a climate of respect or disrespect that can serve to either inhibit or nurture misconduct. Strategies to discourage abusive behavior in the church can examine how member values and behaviors are shaped by such cultural elements as the following:

Language, e.g., customary use of disrespectful, profane, exclusive, or derogatory language; racial epithets; demeaning humor; labels that objectify and depersonalize; or verbal threats and intimidation

Artifacts and symbols, e.g., paintings, sculptures, books, magazines, posters, articles of clothing, or other objects in the work environment that may contribute to a climate of disrespect

Ethics and values, e.g., the absence or lack of clarity in values defining proper and improper behavior in minister-parishioner relationship, work practices that devalue particular groups of workers, such as gender inequity in salaries, work assignments, or promotions

Modeling of relationships, e.g., the values and behavior modeled by organizational leaders in clergy—clergy, clergy—parishioner relationships in both formal and informal settings.

In many churches the struggle is to bring the implicit and real culture into compliance with the culture defined in the church's mission and core values. Incongruence between these values provides a breeding ground for misconduct. Well-written sexual ethics policies and procedures are rendered meaningless in an environment where organizational leaders are practicing or openly condoning the exact behaviors tabooed by our aspirational values.

Through the conscious examination of our church cultures, we can seek to remove abuse-condoning elements and replace them with elements more conducive to parishioner health, clergy health, and church health.

Organizational Code of Professional Practice

The centerpiece of any response to misconduct of a sexual nature is the clear definition and monitoring of the boundaries of appropriateness and inappropriateness within the ministerial relationship. Our ability to prevent abuses of power and our response to persons who commit such abuses are both contingent upon clear articulation of these boundaries.

A core value that is often embedded in policies and procedures is the presumptive vulnerability and innocence of the client. Many organizations declare unequivocally that the responsibility for setting boundaries in helping relationships is always that of the person with the greater ascribed power—the clergyperson. The parishioner's interest in, initiation of, or compliance with sexual intimacy has no relevance and in no way diminishes the clergy's total responsibility for maintaining boundaries of appropriate conduct in the ministerial relationship. Such responsibility is the very essence of the fiduciary relationships—the special

duty and obligation taken on by the clergy to protect the interests and well-being of the parishioner.

Developing policies and operating with a highly visible policy are powerful tools for shaping and monitoring values within a strong parishioner-centered organizational culture. Such policies articulate clear standards and a body of aspiration values that can serve as inhibiting influences to boundary violations and misconduct.

Organizational Turbulence and Parishioner/Clergy Vulnerability

Are there any types of organizations or particular stages in the life of an organization that generate a greater incidence of misconduct of a sexual nature? There are two such circumstances I have noted from my consulting experience. The first is an increased incidence of harassment and exploitation in organizations going through periods of turbulence and rapid change. The second is the great potential for the abuse of power in what I have described as closed incestuous systems. In both contexts, clergy-parishioner boundary violations can be elicited from and be symptomatic of aberrations in group process and organizational health.

Rapid change within an organization disrupts the psychological homeostasis of all members. Members at all levels who have lost their sense of personal and professional value may seek a variety of channels through which to reassert and affirm their value and potency, including increased incidence of voluntary sexual intimacy between members. Incidence of misconduct of a sexual nature during such periods probably has little to do with sex, but is a means seeking fulfillment for other needs. Attempted sexual contact in clergy—clergy and clergy—parishioner relationships during such turbulent periods may have more to do with power, anger, aggression, physical depletion, loneliness, or desperate needs for self-affirmation than with sexual attraction.

During periods of organizational turbulence, there is a weakening of organizational culture and values. The organization loses its power to shape, monitor, and self-correct boundary problems within clergy-parishioner relationships. Weak organizational cultures lose capacity to define boundaries of appropriateness in ministerial relationships. Weak organizational cultures exert little influence on or control over individual practitioners. Rapid member turnover or growth opens up the possibility of emergent subcultures that deviate from the church's historical values. Turbulence within organizational systems, just as in family systems, marks a period of great vulnerability for role boundary violations. Strategies to address boundary violations amid such turbulence must include the active management of

change and the strengthening of the organizational culture and the values guiding clergy-parishioner relationships.

INCESTUOUS SYSTEMS

Applying family systems theory to organization, I have described the extreme disruption of personal and organizational health associated with sustained organizational “closure.” An incestuous dynamic can result from this closure—a stage in the life of an organization marked by increasing members meeting most, if not all, of their personal, professional, social, and sexual needs inside the boundary of the organization. The progressive closure of such organizations over a number of years was marked by such predictable elements as the following:

- the emergence of organizational dogma—a rigid, and unchallengeable belief system
- the centralization of power and preference for charismatic styles of leadership (the emergence of high priests/priestesses)
- the progressive isolation of the organization and its members from the outside professional and social world
- the homogenization of the members by age, race, sex, religious doctrine, or values via a tendency to isolate and expel that which was different
- excessive demands for the time and emotional energy of members
- the development of a closed social network by organizational members
- the intense focusing on the personal and interpersonal problems of members
- the disruption of church functioning from problems arising in clergy/clergy, clergy/parishioner social and sexual relationships
- the projection of organizational problems on an outside enemy or scapegoating and extrusion of individual members
- the escalation of interpersonal and intergroup conflict to include plots, conspiracies, or coups against church leaders
- the emergence of a punitive, abusive organizational culture
- the fall of the “high priest/priestess” and a contagion of member turnover (breakdown of the system)

Sustained closure of organizational systems (or subsystems) both disrupts the health of members and undermines the health and survivability of the organization. It is my

experience that closed organizational systems have a high incidence of misconduct of a sexual nature and that the intensity and duration of these incidences tend to be greater and more debilitating to victims than incidents in more open systems. The potential for abuses of power in closed systems and the intensity of abuses in such organizations is magnified by:

- violation of the boundary and balance between one's work life and one's personal life
- the loss of outside sources of personal, professional, social, and sexual replenishment
- the progressive depletion (physical and emotional exhaustion) of personal and group health resulting from excessive demands on member time and emotional energy
- the distortion of organizational values resulting from the loss of external feedback and external mechanisms for reality-testing with the outside social and professional community

At its worst, misconduct of a sexual nature can be institutionalized as an element of the culture of a closed system. In such circumstances the abusive episodes are large in number, occur over extended periods of time, and involve large numbers of perpetrators and exploited members. This misconduct often emerges out of the same abuses of power within such organizations. The high level of unmet needs and the distortion of values within the closed system make anyone interacting with this system high risk for exploitation.

In such circumstances, issues of misconduct are inseparable from broader issues of organizational health. Parishioners cannot be protected without intervention into basic problems of structure and process within closed systems. Intervening in such systems requires action targeted at multiple layers of the ecosystem.

THE BROADER VIEW

In summary, when we speak of clergy misconduct of a sexual nature, we are speaking of the abuse of power. We must eventually link our internal organizational efforts with broader movements seeking to confront the whole spectrum of abuses of power, in general, and the institutionalized violence against disempowered persons, in particular. If we only see misconduct of a sexual nature in terms of psychopathology or skill deficiency of the perpetrator, we miss the broader social milieu, which incites or fails to inhibit such behavior. Misconduct of a sexual nature is part of a broader continuum of aggression and violence

toward the culturally disempowered, particularly women and children. As we understand sexual exploitation within these broader frameworks, we can link ourselves to parallel resources and movements seeking to enhance the health of our parishioners, our churches, our communities, and our culture.

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