



Living the Sacred Trust: Clergy Sexual Ethics

Section III: Experiential

Division of Ordained Ministry
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
The United Methodist Church
www.gbhem.org

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Sexual Harassment of United Methodist Clergywomen by Laity

By Beth Cooper

When I answered the call to ministry, no one ever pulled me aside and explained to me that in the profession of ministry that I was entering, at least half of clergywomen experience sexual harassment at the hands of laity. The task of this chapter is to open the eyes of women and church leaders to a problem that is widespread, well documented over the past fifteen years, and hard to address because its proportions are so epidemic and cloaked. It is a challenge to describe such a prevalent problem without casting blame. Ignorance, shame, and culturally accepted gender inequities stand behind the problems that persist in the church. Our intent is to find answers and help for clergywomen so that all of us can help the church.

The church needs to separate the topic of the sexual harassment of clergywomen from the problem of sexual harassment by clergy. The two issues apply different dynamics, and solving these problems requires different approaches. This chapter deals with the first theme, while this series deals with sexual harassment by clergy. Hopefully, fresh awareness will lead you and others to take appropriate actions against inappropriate behavior in the church.

The term “sexual harassment” has evolved since the 1970s, when a women’s movement emerged that called public attention to unfair working conditions for women. Sexual harassment can run the gamut from insensitive use of gestures or derogatory words to unwanted demands that intimidate, demean, or coerce. The church has learned from this epidemic of inappropriate behavior that cultural values which seed objectification and degradation of women and girls do not magically stop at the doors of the church.

According to a 2005 survey of the General Commission of the Status and Role of Women, three-quarters of clergywomen and half of laywomen have been sexually harassed in the local church.¹ The most commonly reported settings were church meetings, offices, and workplaces. In my dissertation, *Do No Harm: Sexual Harassment against United Methodist Clergywomen by Laity*, I provided documentation and research showing that United Methodist clergywomen are more likely to experience sexual harassment from laity than from their male colleagues.²

¹ *Eradication of Sexual Harassment*, <http://www.gcsrw.org/EradicationofSexualHarassment.aspx>. See also Gail Murphy-Geiss, “Sexual Harassment in The United Methodist Church, 2005,” prepared by The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, (Chicago: The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, The United Methodist Church, 2005).

² Beth A. Cooper, *Do No Harm: Sexual Harassment against UM Clergywomen by Laity*, DMin. Dissertation, Wesley Theological Seminary, 2007.

Two different legal forms of sexual harassment have emerged in the United States: (1) the creation of a hostile environment and (2) quid pro quo sexual harassment. In the first form, a person or supervisor creates a hostile environment by making sexual jokes, sexual comments, demands for sex, or sexist insults. This creates an abusive work environment. In quid pro quo sexual harassment, one person threatens another with loss or hardship if he/she does not comply with sexual advances.³

The United Methodist Church has established a definition of sexual harassment. [Sexual harassment is defined as] any unwanted sexual comment, advance, or demand, either verbal or physical, that is reasonably perceived by the recipient as demeaning, intimidating, or coercive . . . Sexual harassment is not limited to the creation of a hostile or abusive working environment resulting from discrimination on the basis of gender. Contrary to the nurturing community, sexual harassment creates improper, coercive, and abusive conditions wherever it occurs in society. Sexual harassment undermines the social goal of equal opportunity and the climate of mutual respect between men and women. Unwanted sexual attention is wrong and discriminatory. Sexual harassment interferes with the moral mission of the Church.⁴

Sexual harassment presents itself in a context of power. For thirty years The United Methodist Church has focused on the task of educating clergy for the prevention of clergy sexual harassment of laity. The church has not fully stopped to examine what happens when laity sexually harass clergy, particularly clergywomen. By focusing on clergy as perpetrators and laypersons as victims, we have missed another major problem. While it is true that clergy have a position of power by virtue of office, laity, and especially laymen, do have power and do harass clergywomen. In many situations, the dynamics of gender trump the power of office.

In their book *Sex in the Parish*, ethicists Karen Lebacqz and Ronald Barton point out that cultural understanding of gender determines roles of power and how different genders react to those certain roles.⁵ They observed that when laypersons behave inappropriately toward their minister, most male clergy respond by being concerned about protecting women, while clergywomen feel that they, personally, are in jeopardy, as well as other

³ Abigail C. Saguy, *What Is Sexual Harassment?* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

⁴ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2008*, (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 104–5

⁵ Karen Lebacqz, and Ronald Barton, *Sex in the Parish* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 1991).

women in their congregation: “Male pastors are concerned about protecting female parishioners from unprofessional advances. Female pastors are concerned about protecting themselves. The difference is striking. This difference is a key to the impact of sexism.”⁶

When Lebacqz and Barton inquired whether pastors had been sexually harassed, they learned that half of the clergywomen reported that they had been sexually harassed in the church.⁷ As pastors were interviewed about their experiences with sexual harassment, their reports showed major differences between what women and men ministers experienced. They observed the power of patterns of gender thinking that contribute to the way sexuality is perceived in the parish. Although Lebacqz and Barton found a small percentage of male clergy who had some uncomfortable experiences with sexual harassment, “they had not experienced situations with the same level of fear, threat, and potential loss as those described by nearly half of the women respondents.”⁸ In order to understand misconduct and provide an intervention, it is crucial to ask who has power and how gender is perceived. Obviously, position and gender provide examples where two people may have different levels of power. Others commonly known include race, economic position, age, host/guest, and experience.

Power dynamics in local churches have been analyzed by applying what has been learned from the development of family systems theory. The family systems approach has demonstrated an additional power dynamic at work in the church. Local churches operate with what may be analyzed and described as a church family system. As in a family in which members have roles and carry out functions, members of congregations have roles and functions, status and position, with power dynamics at work.

Church members live in relation to each other very much as they would within a family. The book *Understanding Clergy Misconduct in Religious Systems* discusses the relationship between behavior, power, and history. Candace R. Benyei points out that the religious community is not a gathering of separate persons, but an interrelated system . . . All the rules of a community are an evolutionary product of its history. The behavior of persons in the community is also determined by where they are placed in relation to others in the congregational structure. This has to do with issues of power.⁹

⁶ Ibid., 133.

⁷ Ibid., 135.

⁸ Ibid., 136–37. Some clergymen have had traumatic experiences of sexual harassment and/or abuse.

⁹ Candace R. Benyei, *Understanding Clergy Misconduct in Religious Systems: Scapegoating, Family Secrets, and the Abuse of Power* (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1998), 1–2.

A family system may harbor shame or a secret. A family may cover up problems, protecting and defending members who abuse power. Members are likely to support unhealthy behaviors within the family system, especially if they fear that the family system is threatened, changing, or falling apart. When changes occur, family members adapt their roles to those around them. Some family members have greater power; and others, less or virtually none. Some have voice in deliberations, and others are dismissed.

The impact of a family system becomes transparent when a person holds office for a very long time. Persons in power grow accustomed to the habits of leadership and become entrenched in their style. The long tenure stunts growth and gives the person in office a false sense of ownership. Instead of emphasizing life lived in response to God, the emphasis is on the individual.

A certain man served as the church's chair of trustees for more than thirty years. He had keys to the church and to every room, including the pastor's office and parsonage. He announced far and wide that he never wanted a clergywoman for his pastor. When a clergywoman arrived, he began to use his keys inappropriately, entering the parsonage unannounced, uninvited and in her absence. He used the privilege of his gender and office to intimidate and create a hostile environment for the clergywoman both at work and at home. Members of the church knew his behavior was wrong, but wouldn't stop him. They were afraid of his bullying and couldn't conceive of anyone else in the role of chairperson of the trustees, because after all, he had held this office for such a long time. This created a perfect setup for harassment on the basis of gender.

The power of the office of clergy has changed, too. In earlier times, clergy stood in a place of respect and authority in the community. In part this was due to their education. As recently as thirty years ago, clergy, with seven years of college and graduate school, were among the most educated members of the community. Respect for authority in the field of morality and ethics is now shared with mental health professionals, doctors, and lawyers. Leaders in the field of religion command less authority than in the past. The changes in times and status may leave clergy more vulnerable. It takes cultural awareness and the cooperation of everyone in a church taking seriously appropriate behavior in the area of sexual conduct to truly create a safe sanctuary. For a church to nurture people in spiritual growth, its sanctuaries must be safe.

Issues of domestic violence can be a part of a church family system, and their presence is closely related to sexual harassment. Just as women stay in battering relationships for many reasons, including economic dependence, isolation, shame, fear, and perceptions of

biblical teachings, clergywomen who experience sexual harassment stay in battering relationships in the church, often for the same reasons.

One clergywoman that I interviewed spoke about the hurt she felt when she was sexually harassed by a layperson in the church she was serving. She had participated in meals and events with him and his family. She pastored the family when one of the children had been in accident and died. They prayed and worshipped together. She spoke of sharing smiles and tears in meaningful times and how the joy of this relationship was shattered because now she is scared to be in the same room with this man who tried to touch her inappropriately. She grieved this loss. Because of her place of employment and how she viewed her relationship with the church, sexual harassment felt to her like domestic violence occurring in the church.

Sexual harassment knows no prejudice. It takes place in every state and nation among people of every race and culture. Even the most intentional and careful clergywomen can be victims. A district superintendent that I interviewed, speaking anonymously, explained that it is the “gray area” behaviors that made her feel uncomfortable.

It is my experience that for the real overt stuff, most people know that it is fundamentally wrong. It is the he said/she said situations that make me uncomfortable. The parishioner that comes up and gives a hug or kiss without asking, or words that can be taken with a double meaning. I have been in some situations that were not of my choice. Once I felt entitlement from a male parishioner who gave me a hug that didn't feel okay. Although I backed away and clearly didn't want the hug, it was as if my response didn't even faze him.

When I interviewed some three hundred United Methodist clergywomen across the U.S. on the subject of sexual harassment, certain patterns emerged that describe their experiences with sexual harassment:¹⁰ (1) Sexual harassment has no prejudice. Women have experienced sexual harassment regardless of whether they are single or married, from one region or another, and regardless of age or class. (2) Despite policies on sexual harassment adopted and implemented in the church, over half of clergywomen who have served in ministry have experiences of sexual harassment while on the job. More is needed in areas of coordination, following processes, educating congregations and leaders, and advocating for clergywomen. Not enough is being done in these areas. (3) When perpetrators call clergywomen names such as *lesbian*, *dyke*, *whore*, and *bitch*, these “put-down” terms do not

¹⁰ Cooper, *Do No Harm*.

have anything to do with the clergywoman's sexual orientation or sexuality but are assaults on the clergywoman's character to which perpetrators feel entitled due to her gender. (4) The most frequent incidents of sexual harassment of clergywomen are attributed to laity. Occurring less frequently are incidents by other clergy and church leaders. However, sexual harassment incidents perpetrated by clergy colleagues will occur when they can be more covert.

WHAT CLERGYWOMEN CAN DO

The most important thing a clergywoman can do is tell someone about the sexual harassment. Putting up with sexual harassment and justifying it by thinking that the perpetrator is your parishioner, in need of your ministry, further enables a person who is harassing you. This maintains an environment for harassment. It does not work to think that you can love or pray someone through to the other side of such misbehavior or to think you can get through your anger, grief, and anguish by yourself. While prayer and love are appropriate, incidents of sexual harassment break the pastoral relationship to the perpetrator. Because abuse in any situation or at any level of intimidation is never right, do not tolerate inappropriateness. Set boundaries. If you are a clergywoman and find that you are in this situation, follow these guidelines:

1. Clergywomen can tell someone they can trust. If you can, don't go alone to the office of a church leader or to a police station. Do not set up an environment where your word may be pitted against another person's word. An advocate, a witness who can help document what is said and agreed upon, is of utmost importance.
2. Clergywomen can document every incident, every meeting with any church official and law enforcement officer as to what was said, the timeline, and what agreements are reached. A clergywoman's record can document patterns, changes, and escalation.
3. Clergywomen can make a concerted effort not to put themselves in harm's way. The measures needed depend on the level and intensity of the harassment. If this means moving to another appointment, it is important to do so. Violence of any kind will escalate. Know yourself, and discern when and if it is appropriate to ask for a move. It is important to trust your inner voice. Your intuition is a valuable tool to help sense danger.

4. Clergywomen can use the process that the church has established to be used when sexual harassment occurs. The system is there to ensure justice and fairness, although that may not happen. Acquaint yourself with the processes outlined by *The Book of Discipline*¹¹ but start with your annual conference guidelines. Know that sometimes leaders do not follow these processes. If you are subjected to sexual harassment, pray and be wise about the outcome you desire. It is up to you to decide what you want to do in the way of formal or informal response.
5. Clergywomen can lessen their vulnerability. Know and trust what you feel. Know and understand your specific church's family system and the operative cultural norms about behavior with women held by the family leaders. As local congregation guidelines are written, and policies and relationships are being cultivated and formed, train your church leaders to understand, apply, and rely on *The Book of Discipline* and the annual conference guidelines and policies. Keep your own behavior above reproach, question, or doubt. Be as safe as you can at all times. Know the laws about hate crimes, sexual harassment, and crimes against women in your state.

WHAT ANNUAL CONFERENCE LEADERSHIP CAN DO

1. Conference leaders need to be thorough in processing complaints of sexual harassment. Up to now, there have been too many times when United Methodist clergywomen who have been harassed went to church leadership for help and nothing was done. Persons holding the office of bishop and district superintendent often are overworked. This does not exempt leaders from following through the required steps and procedures of the annual conference and *The Book of Discipline* when a United Methodist clergywoman brings a complaint of sexual harassment.
2. The DS or bishop should be realistic and ask for help, as needed, to be caring, thorough, and helpful in protecting clergy who have been harassed. A clergywoman's safety cannot be compromised. When a church leader has a conflict of interest, is biased, or cannot handle the situation, it is still

¹¹ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* 2008, 750–81.

his/her responsibility to extend the care of The United Methodist Church to a clergy member who has been sexually harassed, to find someone who can do this, and see that due process is followed.

3. Conference leaders can assess and know their congregations. One of the most effective ways to ensure a reduction in sexual harassment of clergywomen is for official church leaders to understand the congregations under their charge. Before appointing a clergywoman, educate a congregation, as needed. Educate constituents and members about “safe sanctuaries.” Offer training meetings to help people explore, discuss, and deal with gender differences, stereotypes, and expectations. Give congregations tools for learning about sexism. Teach appropriate behavior.
4. Conference leaders can give a clear message that sexual harassment is not tolerated and will not be tolerated in The United Methodist Church. Perpetrators of sexual harassment engage in this behavior when they believe that they can get away with it. Research shows that when communities have zero tolerance towards sexual harassment and when appropriate expectations, guidelines, policies, and roles are applied, sexual harassment is minimized. This creates a climate of openness for talk about gender inequalities without shame or put-downs. Prevention is the best way to deal with sexual harassment.
5. Conference leaders can learn more about gender inequality and sexism. Understand that sexual harassment is not the victim’s fault. It doesn’t work to expect a clergywoman to stop sexual harassment in her congregation or to clean up the mess in a setting where sexual harassment has been occurring. Church leaders who have never walked in a woman’s shoes can’t understand from the inside how the threat of sexual harassment makes a clergywoman vulnerable. Clergywomen can be encouraged to step forward to stop sexual harassment at its earliest indicators. Annual conference leaders must press on to learn about sexism, gender inequality, and cultural norms that compromise the church’s commitment to equality and justice.

WHAT THE LAY MEMBER CAN DO

1. Laypersons need to keep learning about issues related to gender equality because churches may be participating in sexism and taking advantage of gender roles. How the church handles these issues speaks volumes about what negative behavior is acceptable and tolerated.
2. Lay members can ask themselves how they function in family systems and treat each other as family members. When a person has fallen out of grace, how is that person treated? How are women and men treated in the family? How are new people treated? How do members of a congregation handle each other and those that come to be with them in worship and learning about Christianity?
3. Lay members can reaffirm and implement choices of the denomination. As United Methodists, our policy-making groups have affirmed that God calls women to be clergy. Clergywomen are given the rights and privileges of that sacred office. We believe God expects us to show respect for all persons. Each local church should examine and be aware of what it means to be a caring, compassionate sanctuary and how this translates in practice when a clergywoman is their pastor. It is appropriate to celebrate the many ways in which the whole church has helped women answer God's call to ministry. This opens doors for women and daughters in the congregation. Celebration for the church also celebrates the church's daughters.
4. Laypersons can oppose violence against women in their community. In today's world, where violence can be so much a part of a family's experience, it is indeed important for the church to be involved in the community, calling attention to domestic violence month, volunteering time at shelters or food programs, and using available creative means both within and outside the church walls to share the message that violence is never right.
5. Laypersons can lead and participate in training programs, Bible studies, and Sunday school curriculum, instructing all ages from kindergarten through older adult. Committees can sponsor learning events about gender inequality. These programs help people who have different values, anger management issues, or religious understandings that harbor attitudes of entitlement used to justify sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment of clergywomen must stop. The church cannot tolerate a gray area or false belief that cushions entitlement, practice, or implication. The church can do better. The church has made a great start, and the journey has been substantial, but we still have a long way to go for all to understand that even though culture does not stop at the church doors, sexual harassment will not be tolerated. Sexual harassment reduces work productivity in the church. The church's level of concern, however, is more than just about the work productivity. It is about people and healthy relationships. Sexual harassment harms.

The church can go beyond law and culture to protect women and all victims of sexual harassment. The best way to make sure that sexual harassment does not happen is to engage every person in doing his or her part to make sure that sexual harassment is never a subject for jokes, that the victim is not doubted, and that policies are in place and enforced to ensure a just, quick, and fair process. To do this honors the whole body of Christ.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

The Rev. Dr. Beth A. Cooper is an ordained elder serving in the Cal-Pac conference of the United Methodist Church. She received her master's of divinity and master's of sacred music degrees from Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. She received her graduate certificate in Women Studies from San Diego State University. She also received her doctorate of ministry degree from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. For more than a decade she has been researching the subject of sexual harassment and clergywomen.

*Readers who want more information on this subject can look forward to Rev. Cooper's upcoming book, *Under the Stained Glass Ceiling: Sexual Harassment of United Methodist Clergywomen by Laity* (San Diego, CA: Frontrowliving Press, 2011). The book should be available by March 2011.*

Witnesses: Clergy Colleagues

By Ellen Brubaker

When I was engaged to my clergy fiancé, I learned to call a clergy colleague of my future in-laws “Uncle.” His wife was “Aunt.” There was no blood relationship; they were family of a different sort.

These two families had been friends since seminary. Their children were born in the same time span, three to each family. In the early days, vacations were spent one week at one parsonage, one at the other. There was no money for trips, motels, or cottages. As the years passed, the circumstances changed, and the friendship deepened. The two clergymen and their wives grew old together. Death has come for three of them, and the mourning was indeed a family affair.

The two couples who lived in another generation from my own were convinced that, beyond one’s own kin, the clergy family was the only one available. One could not, would not, form close personal relationships within the parish because of the danger of showing partiality. Parishioners would be jealous if the clergy seemed to enjoy friendship with some more than others. If a close friendship were to develop, it would have to be abandoned when the appointment changed.

I began my marriage realizing that this way of forming close, familial relationships with other clergy and their families was the way for the generation of my husband’s parents and extended back many generations. Some of our generation expected to live that way. For others it was changing. New patterns of fulfilling the need for closeness and mutual support were being tried. All of the above speaks to the crucial human need to form relationships that include the best life within a loving family that can be.

Modern life expects that such loving family support can and could exist beyond the kinship group. People often live far from family members; life grows ever more transient, and not just for clergy. Perhaps the recognition of this need for human closeness was always the impetus behind the language that suggested that we clergy were family.

I became more aware of this ideal when I became clergy years later. While my husband and I had close friendships outside the clergy connection, we continued to cherish the sense of family within the clergy of our conference. Over the years we nourished the sense of family in small groups, in social life, in our life of prayer and support for clergy colleagues.

The system encouraged us. There was always support for the formation of clergy groups for a sharing of life together in covenant. The conferences, districts, and clusters

offered retreats and social events for clergy and their families. Never was I more aware of the depth of caring possible within this larger family than at the time of my first husband's illness and death. As I carried my first grandchild in my arms to Bob's memorial service, I felt it all around me. There was the pure power of God's loving care, surrounding me with family. Much of that incredible love flowed from the clergy who grieved with me. Yes, I am a believer in the possibility of family within the clergy relationship.

It is precisely because I am a believer that I grieve for us all when that hope for mutually supportive relationship among clergy is misunderstood or paid lip service. A clergy colleague of mine has said again and again, "I believe in covenants, in the keeping of them, and in the pain that happens when they are broken." She makes a distinction between rules and covenant. Covenant goes deeper than rules, into the heart of life and the grace of God. This is a time in the church when there is confusion in the covenant and the way the covenant lives with the rules.

We have come through generations when the covenant seemed to be kept because so many secrets were also kept. There were those who broke the covenant, betrayed the faith and the family, and we never knew. The guilty acts were often hidden from view. Occasionally someone would exit the ordained ministry and the rumors would swirl like autumn wind for a while. That clergyperson would eventually fade from view along with his or her family. Just as often the sin was "swept under the rug." A new appointment would be announced, and most of us were none the wiser.

This time is different. It had to change. For the sake of the clergy family it had to change. The family is still family, but we now know that parts of what we share as colleagues are dysfunctional. Dysfunction breaks and threatens the covenant. The process seeks to expose the dysfunction, the sin in our midst. It, too, is necessary. It is also painful.

A part of the pain involves the process of accountability. It is time for a reexamination of the strong need for family ties within the covenant. Equally urgent is the need for clergy to understand accountability to God and to the vows of ordination.

A number of years ago a clergyman and a clergywoman, each married to someone else, decided they loved each other more than they loved their spouses. Each had children. It was a crisis in the truest sense. As a part of the cabinet at that time, I remember tears and the prayers. The bishop begged them to reconsider. She arranged to meet with them. They came to the meeting having already decided to leave the state, their families, and the ordained ministry. They did so.

In the wake of their action were immediate families in crisis, hurting parishes, and clergy colleagues who were stunned and in pain. The two clergy, much beloved by many,

simply disappeared. In subsequent months they established life together in another setting. In a few contacts with them I learned that they, too, were hurting. Very few clergy colleagues had been in touch. It seemed that no one had anything to say. In truth there were many among us who did not know where they had gone.

There still seemed to be an uncomfortable silence among those who did have an address. With time we pushed the pain inside and went on. There were those who sought to reach out to the families left behind, and some attempt at healing for the parishes that felt so abandoned. The nagging sense that there were pieces missing has stayed with me. I am still not sure what those pieces of healing might have been, but I know that the lack of them may have been a part of the decision of the clergy to run away, and the agony left in the wake of their flight.

Since that time the incidence of clergy in crisis over matters of misconduct of a sexual nature has only increased. The clergy session in our conference spent two years in agonizing meetings attempting to work through a process with the board of ordained ministry in regard to a well-known and highly acclaimed clergy colleague. Many learnings around issues of power were expounded. In this case a program was sought that would, hopefully, lead to new insight, to understanding the nature of the broken covenant, and to redemption and healing for both clergy and those who were victims.

Counseling, to be paid by the conference, was offered to the aggrieved. We prayed and discussed far into the night. This is an indication of the intense connection within the clergy family. The intensity of the process led to anger and bitterness in our midst because we could not agree as to the truth of the accusations nor the subsequent process in dealing with the pain. The clergy member seemed to many to be in denial regarding his behavior. Others could not believe the accusations. There were those of us who found it necessary to work out our differences and enter into a process of forgiveness and healing because we were so divided among ourselves over the issue.

With this case I became all the more convinced that there was and is a familial quality among us. If there were not, it wouldn't have hurt so much. There was the desire to bring truth and reconciliation to all involved, including our clergy brother. It is painful to know that the ultimate resolution became more legal than reconciling and that there is still pain in the family. Once again precious family members seemed to disappear.

At present the process is one that continues to leave the clergy family puzzled and confused. Of course it is inappropriate for all clergy to know all details of every situation. Yet we continue to hear of clergy members who suddenly exit the system. There is no chance to say good-bye, to ask that brother or sister if there is any way we can help. We

seem to be caught in a process that now functions more quickly. We begin to wonder if we are not sweeping the problems under the rug in a new way. We ask ourselves what our faith, our sacred covenant, has to do with all of this.

Clergy witness to the process of grace and sin, repentance and redemption, and question why it is so difficult to apply gospel truth among ourselves. Our particular Wesleyan theology places the emphasis on grace as the beginning of our relationship to God's love in Christ. The breaking of sacred trust is that which needs to be exposed to the light of divine judgment, to be guided into a process of confession and repentance, and to lead ultimately to reconciliation and return, if at all possible. Are we seeking to apply such a process to clergy misconduct of a sexual nature? If not, when do we begin one?

A recent case involves a clergyperson accused of an incident of some years ago. He claims that he thought the issue had been resolved. This is apparently not so for the accuser. Rather than submit to further investigation, the clergy member surrendered credentials. The announcement came in the mail. It was brief—just a few sentences. Now, he, too, is gone.

Are we beginning to fear the system so that leaving it seems easier than dealing with the process? What should have happened for our brother and for his accuser that will never happen because he left? Are we all wondering who will be next? Have we begun to rely most heavily on the steps in a quasi-legal process rather than engage the difficult and often painful work of human redemption and grace? Are there steps missing in the current process that could encourage both clergy and those involved in the misconduct? What is possible in developing a process that reflects both the judgment and the love of Christ in an environment of hope?

Is this not what happens to families at their best? One reared in an environment of unconditional love is never finally separated from the family. When the family covenant is broken, there is the work of justice and repentance to be done. Discipline is needed in order to rebuild broken trust. Like the parent of the prodigal, the family looks for the return of the lost and seeks to welcome that one home with open arms. This may not always be possible, but it is a goal worthy of the gospel and worthy of the covenant of trust that binds the clergy in ties of family.

Living in sacred trust reflected in covenant is God's way of continuing to teach us who we are as persons working out our salvation on a daily basis in an atmosphere of grace. We do indeed turn our backs on that grace. It is the strength of the family covenant that must offer the power to draw us back. We do so in pain and in promise, and in hope of a new tomorrow.

I understand that a clergy colleague is returning soon to appointive ministry. While I do not know, nor care to know, the details of repentance that he has undergone over several years, I have known him as a valued colleague. He is part of our family. I can only trust that he has fulfilled the requirements asked of him, and has satisfied the expectations of those who have worked with him in the process. It is in that trust that I wait to welcome him. In remaining within the covenant, he is perhaps the beginning of the new tomorrow.

ADDENDUM

The hope expressed in the body of this revised article, originally written in the 1980s, is as true today as it was then. The need for covenant living among the clergy family has always been the imperative for lives that reflect the love of Christ in every aspect of ministry, including the way we live with our immediate family members. There are, however, new challenges in this new century. We are in danger of failing to take time for face-to-face dialogue. The students I taught in a college setting after I retired from the parish ministry seem to know that depending on Facebook to maintain quality relationships with friends and loved ones is not healthy. They still managed to spend precious hours on Facebook, texting, and using other methods of relating in cyberspace. It is all too easy to fail to save the time for one-on-one relationships that are built over a lifetime. This tendency is pervasive in our culture, including within the clergy family. We constantly hear about rising levels of stress and anxiety, given our lifestyles of constant activity. The church needs to encourage and nurture sacred time for all the aspects of our family life. In my years on our Board of Ordained Ministry, I came to know many younger clergy who were aware of the constraints on their time. Their commitment to ministry included time for personal renewal and family life as well as the hours given to the parish. This continued commitment will do well in meeting the challenges of our fast-paced culture.

Another significant challenge is the increasing extent of polarization. We hear often of the hours each day that many people have their eyes glued to the TV. It is clear that television, including so-called news programming, is ever more given to entertaining us with extreme views of every issue. We see angry experts on each end of a spectrum, but seldom do we see what was once called civil dialogue. Civil dialogue involves bringing a reasoned and informed opinion to the issue being discussed. It also demands that we listen well in order to be open to others who may disagree with us but who may still offer wisdom to be considered. In the life of the church, this openness is a spiritual commitment. It is this spirit that can bring understanding to life in the clergy family. In the past we applied this standard as new issues arose. This patience and open dialogue helped us to better understand clergy divorce and other situations once kept in the shadows. Now is the time to apply the same compassion and humility to the sisters and brothers of same-gender sexual orientation who seek to be part of the clergy family in order to honor their call to ordained ministry. We cannot listen to the leading of the Holy Spirit from a polarized and calcified position. Only when we gather around the table together, listening and speaking in the spirit of Christ, can we hope to be the clergy family that we are called to be.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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