

Clergy Sexual Misconduct: A Systems Approach to Prevention, Treatment and Oversight

John Thoburn M.Div., Ph.D.

Rob Baker M.A.

Steve, the pastor of a large church on the Eastside of Seattle, cruised along Aurora Boulevard staring intently out his side window at each woman he passed. He was looking for a particular type. There she was; young, blonde, attractive. He pulled over and offered her a ride. He took her for a drive into the hills above Magnolia with a spectacular view overlooking the city. But Steve wasn't interested in the view. When she asked what he wanted to do he said "just make out." She looked peeved and indicated it would cost the same as a full sexual experience – he was OK with that. They switched to the back seat and began to awkwardly grope like two adolescents (which she looked like anyway), when a blinding light cut through the windshield. The police hauled Steve out of the car and arrested him on charges of soliciting a prostitute. When the news broke, his wife, family and home church were devastated. Steve's wife, feeling disgust and shame, left him taking the family with her and he was forced to step down from his position as pastor - virtually ostracized by the church. Steve ended up selling aluminum siding and drifted away from the Lord into a hard, isolated life of alcohol and anonymous sexual encounters. The church too, reeled from the experience, lost credibility in the community, lost a good portion of its membership and never trusted any of its pastors again.

As Professor Harold Hill said in the Music Man, "Oh, we've got trouble, right here in River City." While the headlines in recent years have been dominated by the sexual peccadillos of priests, politicians and the powerful, the Protestant church has considered itself relatively immune - ignoring the true extent to which this thorny issue is festering among their own leadership ranks. The Protestant church has had its share of sensational exposes, which is only a small representation of the literally thousands of cases that are occurring across the Church landscape in America. There are roughly three hundred thousand congregations in the country with six hundred thousand ordained members serving them. Research shows that conservatively, about 6% of ministers have had sexual intercourse with a church counselee, parishioner or staff member and nearly 10% have had sexual contact. Thirty percent of pastors indicate that they have acted out sexually in ways they consider inappropriate and 15% of pastors have an internet pornography addiction.

Beyond sexual behavior are the equally disturbing attitudes and perspectives that these pastors have toward the sheep they watch over. Seventy eight percent of pastors indicate that they have had a physical or emotional attraction to a counselee, parishioner or staff member. Nearly 15% of pastors admit to daily sexual arousal in ministry and one in five pastors reports weekly lustful feelings toward parishioners. Because of the position of power that pastors hold, these attitudes are more than disturbing, they are dangerous. When a pastor violates sexual boundaries, the harmful, devastating effects extend to not only the person directly impacted, but to the pastor's marriage, family, the church congregants and the greater community. The average number of female victims of pastoral sexual violations is seven per congregation. That's seven

women who also may have spouses, children, and friends – all profoundly affected by the pastor’s betrayal of trust. The typical scenario following the sexual acting out of a pastor is a broken congregation, often split over pastoral allegiance. In fact, it often takes up to a decade for a local church to recover from the blow of pastoral indiscretion. One large church of two thousand plus members in the Midwest disintegrated when the pastor’s sexual violations came to light and another large church in Los Angeles slowly withered away over several years until it finally died out as some congregants continued to embrace the pastor who had betrayed them. This alarming and growing phenomenon cripples the credibility and erodes the efficacy of the Church.

The issue of clergy sexual misconduct must be addressed, but it must be addressed in a manner that will actually help alleviate the problem. Most denominational policies regarding clergy sexual misconduct espouse grace and mercy toward the offending pastor. The reality is that: 1) Denominations and churches deal with this issue on a case by case basis. They often turn a blind eye to the behavior due to the tremendous implications inherent at the personal as well as system wide levels. They are not prepared to address these dynamics with the appropriate infrastructure and the necessary processes required. The result is that they may ignore it or deal with it by reassignment. Most often, pastors who act out and are found out lose their position and career due to issues of liability. Their fall tends to be not just from one church, but from their overall call to ministry. 2) The church tends to deal with clergy sexual misconduct after it has occurred, rather than taking steps to prevent it taking place. Up until now, teaching and writing on the subject primarily emphasized treatment, recovery and restoration for both pastor and congregation, but since the first survey done on the subject, by Leadership Magazine in 1989 and the first full scale research project on the subject undertaken by Thoburn in 1991, little has changed. The numbers cited above demonstrate that the Church just does not know what to do to decrease the persistence of this problem. 3) Since most of the focus has been on the recovery and rehabilitation of the pastor himself, the systemic elements of the issue have been largely ignored. It is vital to recognize that there are interlocking dynamics involved with pastors who act out and that each of these components must be addressed in relation to the others.

We have identified four elements that must be meaningfully integrated in order to restore the Church and its leadership to sexual integrity and overall vitality. These four elements are prevention, treatment, spiritual formation and oversight - undergirded by reconciliation theology. A systems approach at the central governing body level is called for to integrate and implement these elements. A comprehensive systems model includes infrastructure that effectively attends to all parties’ needs and well-being at the spiritual, intra-personal, inter-personal and environmental levels. This infrastructure, in the form of a pastoral oversight team, would be designed to fit under the oversight of the central governing body. This team of appropriately experienced members, would be responsible to develop and oversee programs that support the health and ongoing personal and relationship development growth for pastors and their marriages, including the dynamics of sexual integrity. Further, the team would be responsible for

the investigation, treatment and oversight of sexual misconduct and ministry restoration. Finally, this body would facilitate the care for parties directly and indirectly impacted by instances of clergy sexual misconduct. A comprehensive systems approach certainly requires devoting attention to the many aspects and ripple effects of ministry malfeasance. But this kind of approach also recognizes the need to support the emotional and relational health and sexual integrity of the whole Body of Christ with appropriate educational and support programs – with these becoming normalized into the life of the church.

Prevention

Prevention measures must be taken at every level of education and authority with which the minister is affiliated. This begins in seminary with an honest appraisal and evaluation of the pastoral candidate's call to ministry. Conscious motives account for 10% of a person's actions, while unconscious motivations account for the other 90%. One minister noted that he believed he had been called to ministry by God. But after examining his life, something he had never done until he fell from grace, he said he was probably called to ministry by his mother who wanted a minister son.

Seminary does an excellent job of preparing students theologically, but issues of practical ministry are often left to the student's internship. Potential challenges and risk factors of ministry involving overwork, boredom, stress, burnout, and relationship conflict are woefully neglected. In fact, seminary is often the first place ministers learn to over function and over work. Seminaries need to educate and train seminarians in how to address these ministry challenges, including the potential risks for sexual misconduct.

Healthy relationship dynamics needs to be a priority as a core value in seminary and ongoing ministerial training. An emphasis on spiritual formation in Christ is primary. Upon this foundation, it is important to establish meaningful approaches to personal care and growth, healthy bonds in one's marriage and family, and other significant relationships and with the congregants they serve. Students need to be oriented and have it emphasized that all ministry flows out of these relationships. When I was in seminary my wife and I (John) hammered out a weekly schedule that we both could live with – which included only three nights at the library and little to no school work on the weekends. I was planning to go on for further graduate training and knew that my GPA would take a hit with this arrangement, but I was determined to come out of seminary with as strong or stronger a marriage as I had when I went in. Research is clear, for example, that marital dissatisfaction is strongly correlated with sexual acting out by pastors and frighteningly, 41% of pastors report marital dissatisfaction.

Spiritual formation

Spiritual growth is vital to leading a healthy life. If a pastor is imbalanced in his life, he is probably not actively participating in spiritual formation. Many denominations have education and training programs that emphasize the need for spiritual growth in the pastor's life, but don't

really have mechanisms to promote that growth. The pastor often feels that he cannot share his true self with members of his congregation because they are looking to him for spiritual leadership at some idyllic level. Denominational conferences, synods and presbyteries need to place a premium on spiritual formation. This focus can include supervised and peer-oriented programs and formats that provide for ongoing spiritual development, as well as personal and relationship growth and support. One innovative approach adopted by a conference in the Northwest is teaming every pastor in its conference with a spiritual direction mentor. The pastor and spiritual direction mentor meet routinely to focus on the pastor's spiritual life and challenges as well as to cultivate authentic growth in Christ. The stance of the mentor is non-judgmental, accepting of the pastor (though not always of his behavior) and intimate in an I-Thou way. This kind of spiritual formation is rooted in the social theologies of Bonhoeffer, Buber and Barth, where intimate relationship with God and with one another is the hallmark of life in Christ.

Treatment

Prioritizing a healthy relationship with Christ, oneself and one's significant relationships requires a balanced approach to ministry. However, many churches place heavy expectations on their pastors. Common expectations can include: ministers will work or be available 24/7, they will be perfect role models for the rest of the Church - bigger, stronger, kinder and wiser than anyone else. Ministers can be expected to wear many hats well; to be successful preachers, teachers, evangelists, healers, sacramentalists, administrators and program managers. Surveys indicate that a preponderance of ministers feel inadequate for the work they do and many are afraid of being fired. So, to compensate they overwork. This can pose the risk of neglecting personal and spiritual vitality as well as creating problems for marriage and family life. Further, the minister may also attempt to compensate by seeking strokes from the workplace and congregants, which further disrupts personal and relational balance. At the same time, pastors often experience a great deal of isolation in their role and have little accountability for their time. Ultimately the pastor can feel overly stressed and burned out and seek emotional soothing – the kind that often takes the form of the misuse of their role to pursue sexual acting out behavior. The risks involving the potential loss of their position and economic viability, as well as the tremendous fear of exposure and shame, serve as deterrents to coming forward with their struggles in all of these areas.

Discovery of a pastor's crossing sexual boundaries creates not only a tidal wave of serious harm and betrayal to those impacted, but the question of how a pastor could become involved in such behavior often seems to defy credibility. This experience can be extremely disorienting for all parties, especially those close to the pastor. Therefore, a comprehensive and thoughtful approach to investigation, evaluation and treatment is necessary. Those clinically trained in the area of sexual dependency and treatment, along with denominational or church leadership who have experience in recovery dynamics can provide a team approach to assessing and making treatment intervention recommendations according to the pastor's history, personality and problematic behaviors of concern. The priority in assessment and treatment for

the pastor is his/her restoration as a follower and child of God, more so than the question of returning to a ministerial leadership position. While it is appropriate to desire restoration to ministry, the pastor needs to be prepared to relinquish the possibility of a future professional leadership position in view of the above priority.

The treatment model also includes attention to the evaluation and facilitation of care for all parties impacted by the pastor's misconduct. This includes the pastor's spouse, their marriage, family members, as well as other directly and indirectly impacted parties including church congregants. This care needs to be facilitated by appropriately clinically trained providers and organizational consultants.

Oversight

Finally, Carnes research informs us that it takes from 3-5 years to effectively integrate personal and relationship recovery into the many aspects of one's life. Therefore, for those deemed appropriate for consideration of treatment and potential restoration to ministry, infrastructure and protocols for the ongoing oversight of their progress need to be put in place. Consideration of legal liabilities, and the designation of personnel and financial resources for a comprehensive restoration plan need to be evaluated at the outset and on an ongoing basis. Depending on the resources available by the church/denominational governing body, a plan for provision of these resources needs to be designed for each pastor's situation.

A comprehensive systems approach for addressing the challenging and stubborn issue of clergy sexual misconduct needs to be undergirded by a relationally oriented theology. Relational theologies find their ground of being in the atoning work of Christ, who came so that people might be reconciled to the Father. Much of modern theology has a judgment or punishment orientation. To be consistent with God's own character and work, assessment and treatment must emphasize a truth in love based approach to the restoration of the person and his/her relationships. It may or may not be the case that upon evaluation or through a comprehensive personal and relationship treatment program that the pastor be recommended to return to a professional leadership position. It may be determined that another role would be more appropriate in the church as the person continues to grow in their personal and relational restoration. Though the pastor may not return to professional ministry, a true and humble commitment to personal healing and recovery, along with endeavoring to restore his relationships with integrity, may allow him/her to meaningfully impact others for good in ways that he/she may not have ever previously considered. If this can be the outcome, whether or not the pastor is restored to professional ministry, a comprehensive systemic approach to clergy sexual misconduct will have contributed significantly to the goal restoring credibility to the Church and its mission to serve Christ's work of redemption on the earth.

As might be ascertained from the above, a systems approach is what is needed to effectively tackle clergy sexual misconduct. This approach is probably not given sufficient

consideration because it requires a multifaceted and dynamic approach to what is a complex problem. We recommend that seminaries, denominations, church conferences and local churches acquire the wise counsel and resources of consultants trained in a systems approach to Church and clergy life. Through an organizational systems approach that emphasizes prevention, formation and oversight as well as treatment – all steeped in a theology of reconciliation, strong inroads can be made to educate and train clergy in how to be resilient and honor their call from God.