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# It's not just the Bakkers and the priests

An abuse of power and trust

Edited version of a sermon on clergy sexual abuse

**W**e don't talk much about clergy sexual abuse. But this might be a good Week of the Ministry to touch on this unpleasant and difficult subject. The *Chicago Tribune* drew a heated response by running an editorial cartoon recently showing four Roman Catholic priests watching Irish folksinger Sinead O'Connor tear up a picture of the pope on TV. Three priests are outraged. The fourth is thinking, "I wonder what she's doing Friday night?"

It did call for response, but it's not as though clergy haven't brought this on themselves. The celebrated falls of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart set the tone for an avalanche. Fr. Bruce Ritter had to resign as director of Covenant House, a shelter system he started for runaway kids, after allegations of sexual misconduct in 1990. A Lutheran bishop in Wisconsin resigned under similar circumstances about a year ago. The Episcopal diocese of Colorado was assessed \$1.2 million in a civil suit awarded to a woman who had been involved with a priest. A number of allegations are pending against Chicago-area priests. This is a serious problem! And it's not new.

Recently the Archdiocese of Chicago took steps designed to go after this problem. I think we Protestants had better do so, too. Some studies show that as high as 38 percent of all clergy are or have been involved sexually with their parishioners. The situation is similar for psychotherapists.

What's wrong with this type of behavior? At least three things. First, such behavior is destructive, both to the parishioner and the minister; second, it is an abuse of power because clergy are always in a stronger position than the parishioner who usually comes to them in a situation of need or dependence; and third, it is a breach of the trust a parishioner puts in his or her own pastor to be *compassionate and caring*, but not abusive or exploitative. This behavior not only reflects badly on one or two individuals, but on all the ministry and on the church as well. It is the church that has approved and ordained the minister for, among other things, the role of trust-holder and care-giver. When this role is violated, the whole church suffers.

People need to be able to trust their pastors with *confidence*—to be able to share the dark sides of themselves that they can disclose to no one else. Pastors need to be able to hear those things without immediate *judgment*. And pastors must not *take advantage* of the

By Mark Miller-McLemore

just placed in them by another. The pastor's job is to reflect the love of God—steadfast, trustworthy, caring for the whole person—not taking advantage of another's vulnerability to meet his own needs.

Where's the good news here? Fortunately, I can think of a number of things. We are becoming more aware of the problem of sexual abuse by clergy. And we are learning how to deal with it. One of our first learnings is to take reports of it seriously. We need to be fair. We need to not perpetuate the pain by saying things like, "Not our pastor!" We need to support the victim and not lay blame at his/her feet by asking such questions as, "Whatever did you do to provoke this?"

We need especially not to hide clergy sexual abuse with a transfer. This merely keeps the secret in the closet and passes the problem on to someone new.

We need to insist on counseling for everyone involved. If the abuser is our pastor, we need to take on the cost of counseling for his or her victims. And we need especially to insist that a clergy sexual abuser undergo serious counseling before we ever consider allowing that person back into a role of trust and authority in a congregation.

Finally, we need to support clergy marriages and families. We need not allow our pastors to warp their priorities in their use of time to the extent that their families and their marriages suffer.

God does give us sex as an expression of love. God does give us pastors and parishes to have a special and intimate relationship—but not a sexual one. ☩

Miller-McLemore is pastor of First Christian Church, Chicago Heights, Illinois.

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was simply understood by all Christians that their ministers were either celibate (for life or until they married), or married and faithful to their wives. This understanding was based both on the witness of scripture and the tradition.

But today there is much confusion about what constitutes "Christian" sexuality. Sex before marriage is common, even in seminaries. More than half of all married Americans are unfaithful; clergy are by no means immune. What this all means is that there are no longer clear theological guidelines for how Christians in general—and ministers in particular—are to live out their sexuality. This makes it easier for ministers to cross boundaries not only in their personal, but also in their professional lives.

But a theological perspective says that ministers have a special calling to help their members grow in relationship to God; having sex with the minister does just the opposite, often completely alienating women from the church and God.

Many of us have a tendency to blame the women involved in these situations. We assume that ministers are "holier" than most

people, and so it must be the woman's fault: she seduced him. But experts in both psychology and theology deny this is the case. Psychologists say that because of the power difference between ministers and their members, and the transference that arises from it, it is *always* the responsibility of the minister to keep a sexual relationship from occurring.

People in theological fields have more varied perspectives, but most believe that because it is the minister's job to nurture church members in the faith, preventing sexual contact is again his responsibility.

Our temptation, of course, is to say that this sort of thing could never happen in the Disciples. And there is, apparently, a difference in the rates of clergy sexual abuse among denominations; one survey showed that the rates ranged from 18 to 45 percent of reporting ministers, depending on denomination. But even the most conservative estimates suggest that at least 10 percent of all ministers—Disciples among them—are having sex with members of their congregations.

Even if we are shocked by this information, we recognize it is not a good thing, and we want



## Forgiving

**I**n the Christian context, the question is always asked, "What about forgiveness?" If we believe in the grace of God, and in the freedom which speaking the truth can bring, then we know that none of us is irredeemable. We can be saved, and we can be forgiven. The problem is that we can so quickly move to forgiveness that we neglect to hear both the anguish of the victim of the abuse and the repentance of the abuser.

Marie Fortune, Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence is helpful. In her book *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (The Pilgrim Press, 1983), Fortune offers these insights into forgiveness and repentance.

She says that "for Christians, forgiving is one means of letting go and disarming the power that the offense has over a victim's life. Jesus teaches that a person must be willing to confront the offense and being willing to forgive as many times as it takes. But it is also clear in this scripture that a person's forgiveness is dependent on the offender's repentance."

Sexual misconduct lends itself neither to quick forgiveness nor easy repentance. Repentance follows confession. Further, "repentance goes beyond confession, apology and good intentions. Repentance means to turn around, to change one's behavior and not to repeat the offense. If one does not do whatever is necessary to change one's abusive behavior, then confession is at best a sham and at worst a ploy."

Neither forgiveness nor confession/repentance is easy. Yet both are necessary if true healing and restoration are to take place. The church can help by encouraging us to "speak the truth in love" to one another.

—La Taunya M. Bynum  
Homeland Ministries staff