

## **MINISTRY TO CONGREGATIONS WHERE CLERGY SEXUAL MISCONDUCT HAS OCCURRED**

The impact of clergy sexual misconduct on members of a church will vary depending on their relationship to the church, their relationship to the clergy, their relationship to the victim, their own personal history, and the way the process unfolds in the life of the church.

Nils Friberg, professor of pastoral care at Bethel Theological Seminary in Minnesota, lists several areas of impact on the members of a church faced with this painful experience.

### **Spiritual Impact**

When clergy fails sexually, members wonder what else he preached about and stood for might be in question. Worship is called into question. Members are shaken when they realize that the clergy person may have known them intimately and have even counseled them in spiritual matters. They have performed the marriages and the funerals. The fabric of spiritual life has been torn.

### **Impact on Leadership**

When the misconduct occurs what happens to church leadership? Who should speak and act? It is often hard for members to let a fallen clergy person go. They want to be forgiving and exercise mercy. How can they step up and provide leadership? Should they let others know of the crises in their church? Often church leaders become exhausted and frustrated from having to deal with these issues and the pressures from their congregations.

### **The Perpetrator's Influence on the Process**

Members and community are often impacted by the story the offending clergy tells. The task and healing of the church are affected by the "spin" the clergy places on the failure. How a confession is presented has a lot to do with the reaction and future healing of the congregation. Was the victim blamed or was there a clear and simple presentation of the facts?

### **The Impact of Media Coverage**

The media can bring excessive shame and embarrassment to a congregation by playing up the sexual misconduct of the clergy. Fear of the damage done to the witness and ministry of the church can alter the response of the

members. Already difficult events become more intensified under media scrutiny.

### Associate Staff

Members of a church staff are deeply affected by the actions and misconduct of another staff member. They may become suspect of cover up or misconduct of their own. Jobs are in danger. They are now charged with the responsibility of caring for the wounded congregation.

### Spouses and Families

When the failure occurs the marriage of the clergy is called into question. “Has this happened because he/she was failed by the spouse at home”? When a spouse defends the clergy or continues in denial in spite of overwhelming evidence, they set themselves at odds with the membership.

### Grief

As in every loss, the church goes into the grief process. The stages are evident and should be dealt with effectively.

### Hypervigilance

The congregation wants to know how to keep this from happening again. Use of the Covenant of Clergy Sexual Ethics shown on page 27 of Broken Trust and the Employment Agreement on page 34 are two examples of help afforded churches.

### Pastoral Care

What does this look like in these situations? Some will think there is prejudice toward one side or the other. Some will feel that ministry to the offender is not warranted.

### Those Apparently Unaffected

There may be many who just want to “get this behind us and move on”. They are not as concerned with the pain and upset feelings.

### Sexuality

Some members will have a problem understanding how their clergy could have a problem with “SEX”. Somehow clergy should be above this. Others will worry that if he/she couldn’t control this area of life .... they are in real trouble.

### Spiritual and Theological Issues

“What was the role of God in protecting us from this?” “If you can’t trust the minister of God, who can you trust?” “If someone who is called of God and filled with his Spirit can do this, is our theology all wrong?” These and other questions must be addressed.

### The Victim

Often the victim is blamed by the church. There must have been some seduction. In truth, counseling and legal experts assert that professionals are always responsible for the safety of the personal boundaries of anyone who comes to them for help. This is an educational process for churches.

There are additional areas of concern for churches:

1. Filling the pulpit in the first month after the exposure. Minister/Church Relations can be of help here in providing trained pulpit supply or interim pastors.
2. Some Intentional Interim Ministers can be trained in “Sexual Specific Recovery” for congregations. This training might be done by Counseling and Psychological Services Center.
3. Encouragement should be given to churches to report clergy sexual misconduct to Minister/Church Relations in order to protect other congregations.
4. Specific information should be prepared for deacons/church leadership in dealing with clergy sexual misconduct and the aftermath.

FURTHER CONTACTS:

Victim Response Teams

Intentional Interim Ministry