





## **SAFE CONNECTIONS**

### **WHAT PARISHIONERS CAN DO TO UNDERSTAND AND PREVENT CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE**

A Resource for Members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

by the Reverend Jan Erickson-Pearson

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PLEASE NOTE: This is a historical document of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and while it is still a useful, valid resource, references made to unit and staff names, publications, financial figures, etc., may be out of date.

Please refer to [www.elca.org/safeplace](http://www.elca.org/safeplace) for the most current information.

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Division for Ministry

Chicago, Illinois

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# INTRODUCTION

Healthy relationships of trust and respect between laity and clergy are essential for carrying out the mission of the church.

This resource is provided to members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in the hope it can assist us in creating and maintaining strong, creative, and healthy relationships of integrity and safety, for the sake of our common ministry to the gospel of Christ Jesus and to the people of God.

Clergy sexual abuse is a threat to this vital ministry.

Clergy sexual abuse, whenever it occurs, causes serious disruption to the lives of those individuals involved, to their families and close friends, to the local congregation or other ministry setting, and to the larger church. Sometimes this disruption is felt right away; in other situations, the enormity of the betrayal becomes apparent over time.

Many members of our church are confused about the definitions and dynamics of this problem. What is clergy sexual abuse? Why is it so devastating for individuals and congregations alike? Why is sexual contact between pastors and parishioners not just a matter of personal morality?

Preventing clergy sexual abuse is a strong commitment of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The key to prevention is education.

This church is working hard to provide education and training for pastors and other ministers, expecting this effort to reduce the incidence of clergy sexual abuse. But that is not enough.

Lay members need knowledge and resources to assist them to understand this problem, to recognize it—or the danger signs, to respond promptly and appropriately, and to move toward healing.

While it is always the responsibility of the pastor to maintain the integrity of the pastoral relationship, we want parishioners to have as many tools as possible to help them steer clear of this disaster.

We are realistic to assume that all of the education and training of pastors, all of the screening and background checks in the world will not keep some unhealthy pastors from attempting to violate sexual and other boundaries in their pastoral relationships. However, we want to stop as many of those attempts as possible from developing into abusing relationships.

Every person in a relationship has some measure of responsibility for that relationship. The pastor has a public, vocational responsibility, as well as a personal one, in connection to any parishioners. We seek to provide whatever insight and information we can so that parishioners can make decisions about relationships with greater awareness of their impact and likely outcome. This is not to imply, however, that the burden of stopping abuse will now rest with the potential victim, or that the blame for abuse rests on the victim.

We are aware that sexual abuse can occur in other relationships within the church. Rostered, professional lay leaders, youth leaders, teachers, counselors and others can sexually abuse or harass others in the church. This is a grievous sin. The consequences can be devastating to all affected. The appendix will suggest materials to consult in working to prevent this type of sexual abuse.

However, this resource addresses the specific dynamics of the pastor/parishioner relationship.

In 1992, the Church Council of the ELCA adopted “An ELCA Strategy for Responding to Sexual Abuse in the Church.” Education, training, and prevention are the primary goals of this strategy.

Education and training are helping the church to respond more sensitively and effectively to those who have been wounded by clergy sexual abuse. Bishops, synod and churchwide staff, pastors and other leaders in the church are learning about the consequences of this problem, and about how to intervene and provide care and discipline for all those involved. This is an art, not a science! We continue to learn about how to be more helpful.

We are indebted to a multitude of individuals, especially to those victims of clergy sexual abuse who have struggled to understand what happened to them in the course of sexual entanglement with their pastor. Their hard-won wisdom enriches us all and may save someone else from this suffering. The ELCA Commission for Women led the way as this church began to listen and take seriously the pain and concerns of those affected by clergy sexual abuse.

Insights and analysis offered by many other lay members of the church, pastors, theologians, therapists, teachers and church leaders inform our work and are reflected on these pages, along with our own. Responsibility for their expression, development and interpretation here belongs entirely to the writer. This is not official ELCA policy.

We are especially grateful to Marilyn R. Peterson for her excellent analysis and for the distinctions and definitions she so exactly provides. “Safe connections” is her definition of a boundary: “a boundary is a limit that allows for a safe connection, based on need.” As we shall see, boundaries are essential for healthy relationships.

Much of our early understanding of this problem came through the work of Marie M. Fortune and Elizabeth Stellas and their colleagues at the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence. Their ground-breaking analysis of the problem of clergy sexual abuse has been enormously instructive across this church and ecumenically. They are joined now by many others who share their wisdom liberally, for the benefit of all.

This text was prepared by one author, with helpful comments and suggestions from many others—lay members, pastors, teachers, therapists, lawyers, bishops and synodical staff, and consultants. The notion of traffic lanes as boundaries, used extensively in this text, is not original to us. It developed somewhere out of the collective wisdom of many colleagues—somewhere along the road. However, you may hold this author singularly responsible if you never again drive your car in traffic without thinking about boundaries in relationships.

Because this work—to respond to and prevent the problem of clergy sexual abuse—is indeed an art, not a science, this resource is hardly the last word on the subject. We learn something important from every situation. It is learning that comes at an enormously high price. We acknowledge with deep compassion and respect all who have suffered consequences from this violation of trust: individuals involved in relationships, their immediate families, close friends and circles of colleagues and loved ones, the congregations and agencies where abuse has occurred, the bishops and other synodical staff who have sought to provide justice and healing for all those affected, and others in church and community.

We know that individuals touched by abuse will read this material. This is not a resource about healing from abuse—except insofar as many victims of abuse say “If I could just, somehow keep this from happening to somebody else....” Some resources for healing are noted along the way and in the appendix. This church is committed not only to prevention but to healing. We hope to continue to provide more help for this journey.

Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.” This resource is offered in commitment to that gospel, so that God’s people might know the power of new life in Christ, and might have it in abundance!

“Set up road markers for yourself, make yourself guideposts; consider well the highway, the road by which you went.” (Jeremiah 31:21)



# PART ONE

## SAFE CONNECTIONS: WHAT ARE THEY?

Every day I drive 28 miles on three different expressways to get to work. I get there safely because I am a careful driver, and because others drive safely, too. We count on each other to obey the rules and expectations of the road. We have cultivated safe habits.

Almost every day I see the results of at least one accident, cars with dented fenders and crumpled bumpers pulled off on the shoulder. Almost every day I have to swerve or slam on my brakes to avoid being hit. These collisions and near-misses happen when cars do not stay in the lane they belong in, or change lanes without warning or watching.

Every now and then, a part of the road is resurfaced. Lane markers disappear. It is usually several days before new ones are painted on. It is unnerving to be on the road during that time. Most drivers are still trying to be careful, but it is hard to stay where you belong without a guide. We drift in and out of each other's space. I find myself exhausted from having to concentrate so much harder.

Never mind the scenery. Or the conversation in the back seat. Or that problem I wanted to think about on the way in. And certainly, forget all about the car phone! All I can do is focus on staying in place.

These experiences always make me grateful for traffic lane markers. Those white lines painted on the road keep us safe. They keep us from crashing into each other, or running other cars off the road. They make it safe for us to be on the road at the same time, moving alongside one another, going where we need to go.

We are talking a lot about “boundaries” these days. This is new language for many of us. The concept, however, is ancient. Boundaries are a way of talking about honor and respect, about not invading or crashing into another person—emotionally, physically, spiritually.

Boundaries are like those lanes of traffic, designed to keep us moving safely together, alongside one another, without colliding or running each other off the road.

### What do we mean—“boundaries”?

Our lives are full of boundaries: places set apart for a specific purpose. We can think of many boundaries in our daily life.

Gardens are a boundary in the yard, free (we hope!) from certain things, like grass and weeds and rabbits, so that other things, like flowers and vegetables, can flourish.

Our names are a boundary. They set us apart as individuals. They are protected by law; no one can misuse our name.

Schedules are a kind of boundary, creating a space for one activity now, and other activity later.

Our homes are a boundary, providing a safe space where we can be with minimal risk of exposure, annoyance, and danger.

We create boundaries when we designate certain places, like stadiums, libraries, garages, parks to be reserved for specific activities.

My two-year-old has built-in boundaries on her plate. Heaven help us if the applesauce and the potatoes get mixed up together!

## **Boundaries are a gift from God!**

Boundaries are important. Boundaries are God's gift to encourage and assure the proper stewardship of time, space, material, people and ideas. We need structure in our lives and our world.

God created structure—boundaries—when God separated the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, for specific purposes. God created morning and evening, day and night. Not one long continuous, unmarked, unending period of time. Life is divided into seasons, days, times set apart for one purpose and another.

The most important boundary we receive in creation is the Sabbath. It is a time set apart. It is time dedicated to a specific and holy purpose. Our Jewish neighbors are helping our family to recover and use this wonderful gift as God intended.

Boundaries are used to designate and preserve times, places, spaces, relationships, ideas and people for a specific purpose, safely and effectively.

Boundaries provide a dedicated space, a place or relationship or agreement devoted to protecting what is vulnerable and safeguarding what is valuable. Boundaries in relationship work to keep us faithful to the purpose of that relationship.

## **How are boundaries important?**

Boundaries make it possible for us to travel together on the same roadway, at the same time, without crashing. They encourage respect and regard for the dignity and safety of others.

Boundaries help to remind and prevent us from taking or using what is not ours to use or to possess. They help us to remember the intrinsic “otherness” of each of God's children.

Many of us have a special place in our home, where we feel safe, to take risks without fear of ridicule, criticism, or exploitation. We have walls and partitions at work. Without them, we often feel inhibited and less free to concentrate on our tasks.

Boundaries help to clarify expectations and purpose. We can get on with the business at hand because we safely make certain assumptions, that others also make, without having to reinvent the process every time. Honesty, fairness, rules, and even manners create a zone dedicated to a specific purpose. “This is what I can expect to happen here.” This frees us to get on with it.

Boundaries create safe places where we can focus our concentration on certain special needs or tasks because we are confident and trust that other basic needs are being cared for.

Boundaries make it possible for us to negotiate our way safely in relationships. We can proceed in trust that the relationship is dedicated to certain purposes, that we won't be violated, or run off the road.

Clergy sexual abuse is a boundary violation. That is, sexual activity in the context of a relationship between parishioner and pastor is an improper use of that relationship. It is devastating almost all of the time.

## **“Safe connections”**

Boundaries are “limits that allow for a safe connection, based on need.”

Safety	Connection
Limits	Need

Boundaries are not walls, created to isolate us, to keep us away from each other, or to set us against one another. Rather, quite the opposite. Boundaries are the lane markers that make it possible for us to be in relation, to be close, to be connected, and to do so in ways that are helpful, meaningful, and safe.

If we had no boundaries, few of us would dare to venture out on the busy roads, for fear of being crashed into again and again, or crashing into others. “Good fences make good neighbors,” as the poet, Robert Frost, has written.

Boundaries—limits, expectations, agreements, contracts, designations, dedications, markers, fences—make it possible for us to safely venture into relationships of trust and vulnerability.

## **Healthy congregations need healthy boundaries**

Church life is a special gift. We are called in Baptism to be a community of God’s people. We are made brothers and sisters in Christ. We are given the gift of community and family, not set adrift to follow Christ on our own.

Especially in the church, in congregational life, healthy respect for boundaries is essential. This is true between lay members, and between laity and clergy. We are invited to bring our most precious, burning, intimate hopes, desires and needs into our life with Christ and with his people.

In the church we are invited to attend to the critical issues and concerns of our lives. This is the place where we bring our sin and our repentance. This is where we come to receive new life. Thus, we are especially vulnerable here. We need to be all the more watchful of our own, and of other’s needs for safety and trust.

“Sanctuary,” is our word for the space where we come to worship and bring ourselves to God, in the company of others. It implies a place of safety, refuge, shelter. Our very life together as the people of God is to be a sanctuary, a place apart, a preserve or reservation, of integrity and respect. The ancient tradition of sanctuary provided a safe haven, off limits to intruders and invaders.

## **What would we do without boundaries?**

If we didn’t have boundaries, we would be all over each other, all of the time. Boundaries are the understandings we have as neighbors: I will not walk into Linda’s house without permission. The children do not open a closed bathroom door. We do not call people on the telephone after midnight. I don’t park my car in the neighbor’s driveway.

If we didn't have boundaries, we would have no schedules, no routines, and we would be always working, but always at leisure. Without a time set apart for specific purpose, we would wander aimlessly through our days, coming in to work when everyone else was at home, going to school when the teacher was eating lunch, and always having that feeling that "I should be doing something else now."

If you have a home office, you already have a good idea of what this feels like. There are advantages and disadvantages of negotiating an important business contract while moving the laundry from the washer to the dryer. The fuzziness of the boundary can be frustrating and exhausting, even while it is helpful in other ways.

## **Boundaries protect and preserve**

Answering machines used to screen calls during dinner are a boundary—a limit or filter on our availability to the wider world. Plans and policies can be helpful boundaries, too, helping to make the best use of time and other resources.

I have created a verbal boundary between me and telephone solicitors of every kind. I am polite but I am firm in saying, without fail, "I am sorry. I have a policy. I do not respond to any telephone solicitations of any kind." That policy, always in place, helps me to make the best use of our precious time at the dinner table (when those calls inevitably come). No long argument, no back and forth at all, just a short statement that is fair and firm. Then, I am free to enjoy my family.

Without these boundaries, we would be endlessly interrupted, and never able to do whatever it is we set out to do, with those we cherish.

"Thou shalt not steal." Boundary violations are stealing. They steal information, time, space, privacy, self-respect, dignity, safe haven, responsibility, and the sense of living in a safe place, moving in a safe environment, trusting the possibility of having a safe connection to others. They impose and intrude. They manipulate, distort, and conceal.

If we didn't have boundaries, we would be hopelessly confused about where to go, and whom to trust, for what. We would call the plumber about our twisted ankle, report broken pipes to the dentist, return overdue books to the gas station and show up at the laundromat expecting to see a play!

## **Boundaries provide focus and direction for relationships and daily life**

Boundaries help make sure we are using time, space, things, feelings and relationships in the most appropriate way. They help to ensure our best use of things, use that is consistent with our intentions and with their original purpose.

Boundaries keep us from driving on the left side of the road, telling lies about our neighbors, and playing the radio in church.

Recent news reports about two women expelled from a Pennsylvania church for praying too loudly describe a boundary violation.

Some boundaries are a matter of law or regulation. Some are common, traditional expectations and public agreements.

Current debate about the limits of free speech are a good example of the struggle to provide wide boundaries for free expression, but at the same time provide for safety in public life. We are hearing a lot of talk about the “bounds of civility.” When informal agreements seem to fail us, we often look to impose formal rules, regulations, and laws. These are boundaries.

When boundaries are established in advance, and agreed upon, we are free to go on with the tasks or plans of the day. We don’t have to reinvent the process for running a fair meeting every time we sit down at the table. We can be fresh and focused on the decisions that are critical.

### **Boundaries are self-discipline**

Boundaries are the limits we place on ourselves to impose a discipline that keeps us from using and invading, annoying and exploiting other people, or hurting ourselves. These are restrictions we place on ourselves to assure we move about safely and meaningfully.

Likewise, boundaries are the limits we place around ourselves to prevent invasions, exposure, exploitation, and annoyance. They are the fences we construct to keep ourselves from being harmed, used, and degraded from outside. They are the restrictions we self-impose to ensure our own safety.

Each of us has the personal responsibility to use our wisdom and experience, and the resources available to us in any given moment, to make sure that appropriate boundaries—of both kinds—are in place and are well respected.

### **Boundaries clarify our intentions**

Boundaries are the agreements we have with each other about what is and is not appropriate, kind, useful, and honest. Sometimes they are verbal and explicit, sometimes they are implicit, a matter of tradition. And sometimes we have to stop and make explicit, (or reconsider), what has been an automatic expectation for some of us, but not for others. This is often a challenge for newlyweds, in relationship to their spouse’s family.

In some cultures, physical touching of any kind is absolutely off limits. It is a terrible invasion of personal space! Some cultures have a tradition of allowing for very close, nose-to-nose, space between two individuals in conversation. In other cultures, or kinds of relationships, people stand a yard or more apart. Anyone who travels knows how tricky it can be to figure out these movable boundaries and to discern the delicacy of certain topics of conversation. What is safe and appropriate in some places is offensive and intrusive elsewhere.

Boundaries are the contracts we have about telling secrets, keeping confidences, not laughing at mistakes, telling the truth. These may be tacit or explicit. We have some special places, like courtrooms and confessionals, where these boundaries are especially clear and critical.

### **Boundaries are not arbitrary**

There are reasons for the limits we place on and around ourselves and others. We learn from experience, often painful experience and suffering, about the harm that comes when we wander all over each other, taking what isn’t ours, or having our precious selves invaded, betrayed, wounded.

Boundaries are logically motivated, usually from some experience of insecurity, danger or damage. We know what can happen if boundaries are ignored, violated, not visible, or misunderstood.

Security measures at airports, hidden cameras in banks, huge concrete planters blocking access to driveways are sad reminders of why we need restrictions and limits on some personal freedom and access to places and relationships. “Time out” is a boundary frequently used by parents, a place apart from the action, for reflection, perhaps even for safety and rest. All of these and many other boundaries are the logical consequence of activity that hurts, invades, or imposes.

Taboos are a very strong boundary in any culture. Gossip, snooping, stealing are taboo because we know what harm they can cause. Other taboos, such as murder, rape, fraud, larceny, adultery, incest, and sloth have obviously dangerous consequences.

Sometimes boundaries are subject to confusion or misunderstanding. Many boundary violations occur because we haven’t talked together about why that particular boundary is so important. It may be assumed to be arbitrary or outmoded, of little consequence.

## **Boundaries convey respect**

Setting limits, making agreements or covenants in relationship, is an essential way of loving our neighbor as ourself. It is an acknowledgement that my actions have the potential to affect another, for good or for ill. Boundaries convey respect for the “otherness” of a person. They provide for the dignity and preserve the value of the other person in a relationship.

My friend has a coffee mug that proclaims, “Everyone is entitled to my own opinion.” I’ve seen a crazy poster, “we are one, my darling, and both of us is me!” Truly the talk of a person with no boundaries.

Our seven-year-old heard a TV report about a dispute between two towns and it prompted her to ask, “What is a border? What are boundaries?” We told her, “Boundaries are the place where I stop and you start.”

Boundaries are a gift from God to encourage and assure the proper stewardship of time, space, materials, people, and ideas.

Boundaries are used to designate and preserve times, places, spaces, relationships, ideas and people for a specific purpose, safely and effectively.

Boundaries provide a dedicated space, place, relationship, or agreement devoted to protecting what is vulnerable and safeguarding what is valuable.

Boundaries in relationships work to keep us faithful to the purpose of that relationship.

Boundaries make it possible for us to safely venture into relationships of trust and vulnerability.

## **PART TWO**

### **BOUNDARIES WITH A PURPOSE**

#### **Special boundaries for unique relationships**

We allow and offer more in some relationships than in others. Healthy family boundaries allow much more to come in, and go out, than the boundary we establish with the wider public. These boundaries are for our own protection and fulfillment; they give us safe space to try things, and simply to be.

For example, a good marriage has boundaries that allow our partner to come very close. We allow ourselves to be seen and known and experienced in extremely intimate and vulnerable ways. We do so out of love for the other and in trust that our partner will not use this access to our most private self in ways that are hurtful of us, whether accidentally or deliberately.

We trust our partner to treat us tenderly and carefully, to guard our safety, to respect and celebrate our dignity, especially regarding those vulnerable and weak aspects that they and they alone are privileged to know. We trust that their unconditional love will provide us a safe place to take risks that lead to growth and to expose our weaknesses to the freeing, forgiving, and transforming grace of God.

#### **Boundaries clarify purpose**

Boundaries in particular relationships arise out of the purpose of those relationships.

We tell things to the plumber because we expect the plumber to use that information to determine why our pipes are clogged and how to unstop them. Any other use of that information by the plumber, as an amusing anecdote at the Kiwanis meeting, for example, is inappropriate and a violation of the boundary that governs our interaction.

We tell things to our doctors that we never tell anyone else and we do so only because we expect that information to be useful in determining a treatment plan for our benefit. We expect the doctor to keep that information confidential and our medical record private. We trust the doctor to order only the tests we need, not those that are irrelevant but happen to help pay for the new MRI machine.

We expect skilled workers to make decisions that will affect us for the good, and to use the relationship between us for our benefit.

We understand that certain compensation is due. If they accept payment, and do not use the relationship for purposes that are for our benefit, we may even say it is stealing. Certainly, it is a betrayal of our trust.

#### **Standard expectations of pastors**

All pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are expected to have special knowledge, resources, authorization, standards, and accountability for the sake of carrying out Word and Sacrament ministry.



## **What do congregations need from pastors?**

Congregations call pastors to serve the gospel in that setting, specifically with the following:

- preaching
- the sacraments
- teaching
- pastoral care and counsel.

Our call committees usually have much longer lists, but these are the basics. Lutheran congregations have come to expect a high level of competence, commitment, and preparation from their pastors.

In order to fulfill these expectations, this church undertakes an ambitious program of seminary preparation to provide skilled and capable pastors to lead congregations. When a seminarian is graduated and approved by the synodical candidacy committee for ordination, that person has significant resources to offer the church in ministry.

These resources continue to build up over the years (we hope!) so that the pastor develops and grows in capacity to serve and in authority. The congregation expects to benefit from these resources when the call is extended to a pastor to serve in that place.

## **What does the pastor bring to the congregation?**

Most ELCA pastors will have these gifts, skills, credentials, and training, to be used in the service of the gospel:

- Master of Divinity degree and special training to carry out ministry tasks (Including extensive study of the Bible, the development of Christian tradition and the church, theology—or the ways people understand God to be at work in the world and who God is—and practical training, gaining insights into human needs and how to care for them);
- specialized preparation regarding the history and practices of the Lutheran church;
- authorization to celebrate and administer the Lord's Supper and Holy Baptism;
- affirmation and credentials, ordination, sanctioning the practice of ministry in keeping with the standards and beliefs of this church;
- personal gifts, charisms, as identified and affirmed by the church;
- access to resources—supervision, colleagues, materials, information, and sufficient financial compensation to provide time to do the work;
- a traditional role and status in the larger church and society that sanctions certain kinds of work (e.g. chaplaincy, marriage officiant) and provides respect and access to the wider world.

All of these resources are a benefit to the congregation as a whole and to those within it who come seeking personal care and assistance.

Even while these benefits are serving the needs of the congregation, they witness to the reality of a certain dependency and the vulnerability of the congregation in relation to the pastor.



## **What makes the pastoral relationship unique?**

Our relationships with pastors are based upon our expectation that pastors bring certain essential resources into this relationship, for the purpose of connecting us to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and helping us to see and to know the gospel of God's transforming and eternal grace, manifest in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

These particular resources come from education, training, supervision, ordination, experience, colleagues and peers, the authority of the bishop's office, and personal faith and maturity. The pastor has a seminary education, internship and other supervised ministry training, continuing access to mentors and teachers, the wisdom of other pastors, the counsel of the bishop and synod staff, materials from the church and other sources, and a wealth of tradition by which to be informed and guided.

Besides the resources a pastor acquires in the course of preparation for ministry, and then by service in the church, the pastor has also been affirmed by the church as possessing certain gifts, skills, talents, and other qualities that enable effective ministry. The personal faith of the pastor and the pastor's commitment to the gospel are certainly among those gifts.

In addition, by virtue of ordination, the pastor has been authorized and credentialed to carry out ministry on behalf of this church, and with its authority. This confers a certain status on the pastor within the larger community, providing the pastor with opportunities and responsibilities, with freedom as well as accountability. All of these resources give power to the pastor, for the sake of ministry, in relationship to parishioners and to the whole church.

We might list these resources, or sources of power, as following:

commitments	knowledge
skills	expertise
experience	resources
tools	characteristics
circumstances	credentials
status	authority
accountability	opportunities
colleagues	conditions
traditions	freedom

## **A unique relationship with important boundaries**

The pastor's relationship with parishioners is an especially unique relationship. This is a reality. Regardless of the friendliness and familial quality of the interaction, the pastor is called to a unique position in that community and to provide what the church has come to agree to expect, generally, of pastors.

As parishioners, we enter into that relationship in trust, expecting that whatever occurs in the course of the relationship will be directed to that pastoral purpose. We offer and agree to share

certain information with pastors solely for the purpose of their using it to help us deepen our relationship to Christ, our reliance on God's grace, and our confidence in God's mercy and eternal love.

The boundary in the pastor/parishioner relationship arises out of the purpose of that relationship.

We share vulnerable and intimate aspects of ourselves with pastors, and we allow them to "touch" us in the deepest places because we trust that they are acting and speaking with authority and purpose. We trust them to act in ways that help us. We trust pastors to respect our dignity and privacy, to guard our safety and encourage our growth. We trust them to act in ways that help us to know Jesus.

The pastor's office becomes a confessional for many, and a counseling center for others. We expect that the information we provide in that setting will not become the surprise subject of sermon illustrations or public commentary. We assume that the problem we bring to the pastor in private will not somehow come up that evening, when we sit down together with others at the council meeting.

These are important boundaries. If we do not feel safe in trusting these boundaries, we are not likely to make use of the resources we normally expect to have provided by pastors. The connection between us is not safe.

## **Boundaries keep us on track**

Your pastor has been called to serve your congregation, institution, or agency with a very specific mission: to make Jesus known. This is not a slogan, or an emphasis; it is the mission of the church and it is always, especially, the purpose of the pastoral office, the pastoral relationship.

That is the only purpose for a pastor's relationship to the congregation or community he or she has been called to serve. Your pastor may actually do a lot of different things; this ministry can take a wide variety of forms and activities. Every one of those things, however, is directed toward the one purpose: to bring the gospel of Christ and make Jesus known.

Hopefully, your pastor will receive gifts of community, inspiration, wisdom, and renewal in the course of this ministry. But that is not the primary purpose of the relationship. The need of the pastor to receive those blessings is not the responsibility of the congregation in the same way that it is the pastor's responsibility to provide for those gifts to the congregation.

Pastors have a very specific purpose in the community of Jesus: they bring us to Christ, and they bring Christ to us. They help us to see him more clearly, to know Christ, to know God's power and love, God's grace and promise to us in Christ Jesus. Pastors are among us to proclaim God's Word, to preach and teach, to call us to repentance, to hear confession and announce God's forgiveness of our sin, and to feed us with the very presence of Christ, in bread and wine. Pastors are among us to serve.

Pastors have a relationship with you and me, the congregation and the larger community, in order to help us to deepen our relationship to Christ, our reliance on God's grace, and our confidence in God's mercy and power. That is really the only purpose for this relationship. Everything that occurs in the context of this relationship needs to fulfill, or be intended to fulfill that special purpose.

As Lutherans, we understand that our pastors have a responsibility both to bring the gospel to God's people and to bring God's people to the gospel. Lutheran pastors are responsible to serve the gospel itself, to guard, preserve and bear it, and faithfully, to serve God's people with this treasure.

Therefore, pastors must be extremely careful as they conduct their work because they are caring for the gospel itself, upholding the integrity of its witness and power. They must not distort, pervert, warp, hide, or blaspheme the gospel of God in Christ.

Every time your pastor asks, "What shall I do?" or you wonder, "What should our pastor do?" the answer to that question, in principle, is the same: bring the gospel, in whatever is done. Whatever the specifics, they must be consistent with this purpose.

Pastors need to be scrupulous in their attention to this mission, and single-minded in their commitment to it. Congregations, likewise, need to be diligent about upholding this expectation.

### **What is the "safe connection"?**

Pastors enter into relationship with parishioners in the context of this purpose: to make Jesus known. It is a commitment they are charged to maintain and fulfill. It is a sacred commitment. They enter into the relationship in the context of a sacred covenant. It is a covenant relationship, a relationship of promise and commitment. Like Abraham of old, pastors make a covenant with God, to serve God and to serve God's people. They are ordained to this ministry, and made accountable to it.

That is the unique boundary of the pastor/parishioner relationship: it is a place where it is safe to expect that whatever is done in the context of that relationship is done to serve the gospel, to fulfill the commitment to serve God and to serve God's people, to make Jesus known.

It is a place of dedication, focus, and concentration for both pastor and parishioner. The parishioner can reasonably expect that whatever the pastor does in the course of their relationship is done somehow, in some way to serve the gospel, and to serve the parishioner with the gospel.

### **Boundaries keep the connection safe**

The pastoral relationship proceeds with the aim of connecting the parishioner to the gospel in a life-giving, saving, healing, and renewing way. It may do this better, or worse, as times go, but the parishioner needs to safely assume that, at the very least, the intention is always oriented toward this purpose and is never at cross-purposes with it.

The boundary in the pastor/parishioner relationship is a limit in the kinds of activity that can take place within or around that relationship, limits that provide for a safe connection, bringing the parishioner and the gospel together. In any decision related to that relationship, it is always necessary to base that decision upon the purpose of the relationship: to make Jesus known. That is always the measure.

## **Self discipline is essential**

Early Sunday mornings are great for driving! No one else is on the road. Northwestern Kansas has some desolate, two-lane highways that stretch out arrow-straight for as many as 25 miles. Colorado has some mountain roads that are perfectly engineered, twists and turns graded for maximum efficiency. I love to drive those roads, and the temptation is to drive them very fast.

No one else is around. No radar patrols. No traffic. Just me and the sagebrush. And pine.

Until I come up quick on a more mellow soul. Or meet a cattle transport truck. Or both at the same time. On a hill. Or a curve.

At times like this, I remember why there are speed limits and traffic regulations, even out on the open road. Even when there is no one watching, it is important to be self-regulating. Even when there is opportunity to violate the boundaries, I need to be self-disciplined. Self-control is vital.

Pastoral ministry abounds with opportunities for unobserved behavior. Pastors spend a good part of their time alone with individuals. They often make their own schedules. And many pastors are quite unsupervised, without office staff or colleagues to notice their comings and goings. Pastors have a wide variety of possible activities in any given day. Most of them are on their own to set priorities and schedules, and get their work done.

Pastors need to have the ability to make good decisions about what to do. Many of the boundaries that govern or direct the pastoral relationship are not easy to monitor. Pastors have many opportunities to “fudge” boundaries of all kinds. The good news is: most pastors don’t.

The ELCA expects pastors to have the maturity and self-discipline necessary to respect and guard appropriate boundaries, even when they are not subject to outside scrutiny. This is not a learned technique so much as it is a lifestyle and personal commitment. For most pastors, this comes quite naturally. Internal regulation, discipline, and monitoring are simply a part of who they are.

Some pastors carry within them the wounds of life experience that make it difficult or even impossible to resist the temptation to cross boundaries. They are not able to be internally disciplined. These pastors are likely to create harmful and hurtful situations wherever they go. It is impossible for any congregation, or for this church overall, to be capable of supervising and monitoring the activity of all pastors at all times. We need to be able to depend upon pastors to be responsible for their own decisions.

While respecting the talents and gifts that some individuals offer for ministry, it is appropriate, even vitally important for the church to decline to offer to these people the opportunity, access, and resources provided to pastors, if it is discovered that they are not capable of self-regulation and self-discipline. In some cases, this church will decline to ordain those individuals who do not seem able to maintain and respect the boundaries of the pastoral office. In other cases, the church will remove these pastors from the roster of ordained ministers, thereby seeking to remove from them the special opportunities—the access, privilege, and resources that enable pastors to come so close to others, with so few observable boundaries to protect that connection.

## **What is the pastor doing here?**

Pastors come to the congregation or other setting as messengers, servants, stewards. They may become part of the community, and sometimes they come from the community. Sometimes that community sees itself, and functions (for better and for worse!) as a family of faith. Pastors may become a part of that family life. Indeed, as all Christians are joined together, in all times and in all places, they are part of that family, that community already.

Pastors, however, do not come to the congregation for the purpose of joining that family. They serve it, they tend it, they steward and manage, lead and guide it. They work in, with, and for the community, for the sake of the gospel. This is a fine distinction, but a very important one.

Pastors are not shirt-tail relatives or distant cousins come to stir things up. Nor are they “hired hands,” “slaves,” or “maids.” They are workers, called by God through the church to serve the gospel in this place.

This sense of mission and purpose needs to direct all of the interaction and all of the activity of the pastor in that community.

As all of us know, this sounds a lot neater on paper than it works out to be in real life!

## **Confusing connections**

There is a new supermarket in my neighborhood. It has a wonderful, big parking lot. The first few days after it was paved, parking there was a frustrating experience. No parking spaces had been painted on, no markers to tell us where to park. Cars parked every which way, cock-eyed, and all over the place. Some parallel to each other. Some at right angles. Perhaps it looked interesting from a low-flying helicopter, but on the ground it was unnerving. You had no idea where the next car would come from, or whether your car would be blocked in when you came out of the store.

Striped lines in the parking lot now keep the whole place from dissolving into permanent chaos. Can you imagine how confusing it would be if not only were there no parking spaces marked out, but not any commonly held assumptions, either, about how cars would be parked in a big open space? Can you imagine the helter-skelter of unpredictability? Can you imagine how much time and energy we would waste, trying to figure it out, every time we pulled into the lot? Would we have to budget time for a meeting, when we went to the store, to meet with other drivers and decide how to park our cars this time? Can you imagine how angry, frustrated, and exhausted we would all be? What a mess!

This sounds absurd! But in many ways, this is how it is for us, in relationships in the church, especially between pastors and parishioners. We go every which way. We have different ideas and assumptions about what is right. Sometimes this works out okay. Frequently, it doesn't. We block each other in, we bump each other coming and going. We decide how we're going to do things, today, and then tomorrow may be different.

Boundaries in church life are often fuzzy, frayed, and ambiguous. Many pastors feel that their profession is a boundary-less one, even a boundary-less life. It is confusing to part of the community, but not really, not exactly a part of the community.

## **Are we family, or not?**

The great difficulty in discerning and maintaining appropriate boundaries in the church stems from the very nature of the church itself. We call ourselves a body, the family of faith.

We have different boundaries in family relationships than we do in other relationships. Some of us have healthy, happy models of family life and others of us don't. We bring widely varying assumptions, patterns, expectations, needs, and goals to this church family relationship.

This is further complicated by the reality that many congregations are a family of families. Different family systems mesh and collide when the church family is together. Most of the time, we are not even aware of these dynamics. This is when they are most dangerous.

Pastors are a welcome, but complicated addition to this family system. The pastor comes as an outsider. The family wants to be welcoming. Or not. The pastor is "adopted." Or not.

In many cases, the pastor is received as a newcomer: step-parent or step-child, in-law or respected great-aunt, but with familial overtones, in any case. Whether the church family says, "Welcome to the family! You're one of us!" or "Keep your distance. You're not part of us," the context and concept is family.

Pastors often feel rejected, bitter, and lonely when they are not received as "part of the family." They may work hard at earning a place in the family system. This prompts them to cross professional boundaries right and left. Pastors often send mixed messages about wanting to be "part of the gang."

Congregations send mixed messages, too, about wanting their pastor to be "just one of us." They are confused about this relationship, especially apart from the formal activity of worship.

"Pastor Tom" suffered a serious heart attack one Tuesday afternoon. A member of the congregation he serves just happened to be on duty as a paramedic and responded to the call. His lifesaving technique breathed life back into Pastor Tom. The ambulance raced to the nearby community hospital where two of the emergency department staff also were members of the congregation.

Word spread quickly that Pastor Tom was being treated and admitted. The admitting clerk, a neighbor of another member, called the church office. "Carol," Pastor Tom's wife, was teaching 5th grade at the local school. She heard the news from her principal, another member of the congregation. The family's children were cared for by close friends, members of the congregation.

During the several weeks of Pastor Tom's hospitalization and recovery, members of the entire community reached out in love and care to the pastor's family. Meals were brought in, child care lovingly provided. Friends arranged to help with Carol's extra responsibilities at school. Best of all, they said later, were the hundreds of expressions of support and encouragement. Close friends sat up through the long nights of fear and loneliness.

Carol and Pastor Tom lived hundreds of miles from their own families. This church family was all they had. And this church family cared for them beautifully. Pastor Tom recovered completely and is still amazed by this experience of being on the receiving end of so much good ministry.



One very important note: members of the congregation were not the only ones caring for this family. Early on, Pastor Tom realized that some of his anxieties and feelings of anger about getting sick were not things for which congregational members should be responsible. It was one thing for him to let on that he was indeed frightened, but quite another to ask members of the church to listen to the depth of his anxiety, his feelings of doubt and insecurity about God's love and his family commitment, his worry about continuing in this ministry, his anger and resentment about working 70 hours a week, the stress of several parish relationships.

Pastor Tom needed a pastor. Pastor Tom and Carol called their pastor: the bishop, who came and provided this care to them.

### **"Who do we want our pastor to be, for us? With us? And what do we want the pastor to do?"**

The orders of worship for the Service of Ordination and the Service of Installation of a Pastor provide helpful guidance. (*Occasional Services*, pages 192-198)

"I present for ordination to the holy ministry of Word and Sacrament \_\_\_\_\_ who has been prepared, examined, and certified for this ministry and who has been called by the Church to the office of pastor."

At the rite of ordination, several passages from Scripture are read, describing the purpose and the authority of this office of ministry. Then the pastor is asked:

Before almighty God, to whom you must give account, and in the presence of this congregation, I ask. Will you assume this office, believing that the Church's call is God's call to the ministry of Word and Sacrament?

The Church in which you are to be ordained confesses that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and are the norm of its faith and life. We accept, teach, and confess the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds. We also acknowledge the Lutheran Confessions as true witnesses and faithful expositions of the Holy Scriptures. Will you therefore preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and these creeds and confessions?

Will you be diligent in your study of the Holy Scriptures and in your use of the means of grace? Will you pray for God's people, nourish them with the Word and Holy Sacraments, and lead them by your own example in faithful service and holy living?

Will you give faithful witness in the world, that God's love may be known in all that you do?

The ordinand answers,

*I will, and I ask God to help me.*

The questions of the pastor at the service of installation to a specific ministry are slightly different. (*Occasional Services*, pages 224-226) The pastor is also asked:

Pastor \_\_\_\_\_, in the presence of this congregation will you commit yourself to this new trust and responsibility, and promise to discharge your duties in harmony with the constitutions of the church?

Will you love, serve, and pray for God's people? Will you nourish them with the Word and Holy Sacraments, leading them by your own example in the use of the means of grace, in faithful service and holy living?

To these questions the pastor is expected to respond,

*I will, and I ask God to help me.*

After the pastor has responded, the congregation is asked,

And you, people of God, will you receive this messenger of Jesus Christ, sent by God to serve God's people with the gospel of hope and salvation? Will you regard him/her as a servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God?

And again,

Will you pray for him/her, help and honor him/her for his/her work's sake, and in all things strive to live together in the peace and unity of Christ?

The people answer, *We will.*

And so the pastoral relationship is established and its purpose is clarified. These mutual commitments are to direct all of the interaction between pastor and parishioners in that setting. These commitments set the boundary for their relationship with each other.

### **"Dual relationships"**

Pastors are part of the community. They need to belong, to be involved, not be totally set apart. They, and often their families, need to receive Christian care and love, as well as give it. They will be quickly depleted and worth less if they are not filled, even as they pour themselves out for others.

Many pastors stay in the same community for a long time. While they didn't come for the purpose of joining the family, they do become part of it in a very real way. They may become its patriarch or matriarch, the elder, the hub of the family system. Many pastors live in small towns far from colleagues, family, or other kinds of professional peers.

It is impossible for pastors to live apart from a sense of participation and reciprocity. And it would not make good theological sense. As complicated as it may be, pastors are always somewhere on a continuum of involvement in the (family) life of the parish. They are not simply functionaries sent to dispense ministry; they are part of it.

Some will argue that the boundary between pastor and parishioners must be firm and unbending: no personal friendships. No personal contacts (such as babysitting). No social interactions. They believe that the risks of misuse and misunderstanding in such relationships are so great, any potential benefit is countervailed.

However, some level of personal relationship is virtually inevitable. And many of these relationships are rewarding, mutually beneficial and good. Perhaps the best thing to say about them is this, "They work until they don't work." Meaning: be careful. Tread gently. Proceed with caution. Danger zone. Stay out unless you must go in. Hard hat zone! Be forgiving when they fail: they were on quaky ground from the start.



The danger here is for parishioners and pastors alike. The connection is not entirely safe.

We call these “dual relationships”—having two different responsibilities and kinds of relationship, sometimes with competing or conflicting demands, to the same person, at the same time. To be both husband/wife and pastor. Doctor and close friend. Pastor and friend.

How about pastor and big sister!

Before beginning this Call to churchwide administration, I was pastor of a small congregation comprised of many young professionals, not unlike my husband and myself. It was a good, healthy place. Newcomers joined us. Some of them were church workers, even fellow pastors. My husband’s best friend from college joined. He and his wife, a longtime member, became godparents to our children. A member babysat my daughter frequently. Other members became good “mom friends,” the only women around who were experiencing new motherhood and could commiserate and share counsel. My younger brother even came to the community and also joined.

Talk about confusing boundaries! These relationships were wonderful and enriching. For me. For them. And they worked. Until they didn’t work. I found conflicts in trying to be pastor to the couple we’d been out to the movies with the night before. It felt awkward attempting to provide pre-marital counseling to couples I also considered to be friends. What if my mom-friend and I had a big disagreement, as friends do, about our kids? Was I still able to be her pastor? And what about being a pastor to your own little brother? It was weird. And it worked until it didn’t work.

Detached objectivity is an illusion in any human relationship. The pastor is involved. Say what you will. Nevertheless, it is helpful to have some clarity and some common assumptions in advance, about what the relationship is, what the tricky points are, and where it might be going.

As difficult as these other pastor/parishioner relationships are, they are what make the ministry relevant, personal, effective, engaged, and vital.

It is impossible to avoid “dual relationships” altogether—whether between pastor and parishioner/neighbor, neighbor and neighbor/teacher, friend and friend/car insurance agent, or teacher and student/son’s friend. The question is how to choose them wisely, manage them effectively, to preserve as much as possible the integrity of the two relationships at the same time. Sometimes dual relationships are so tricky they are virtually impossible, and some of them, like parishioner and pastor/lover are downright dangerous.

### **Guidelines help us to avoid collisions**

Shared expectations about boundaries in the church are just as important as lines in the parking lot. They help us avoid misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

If everybody knows that the pastor takes every new member out for lunch, no one will speculate as to why the pastor and (name) were together yesterday noon at the cafe, “and I wasn’t invited!”

If it is a matter of policy that the pastor never is available on Thursday evenings, we won’t feel personally slighted because she failed to come to our son’s band concert. If we know the pastor never attends wedding rehearsal dinners, we won’t feel singled out for special abuse when he declines our invitation.

If we know that the pastor has decided not to socialize with members of the parish, apart from church functions, we won't feel rejected when our invitation to dinner is kindly turned down. Or, perhaps it is more honest to say, we won't feel as disappointed or let down.

If we like our pastor, (and sometimes even if we don't!) it is natural to want to have a personal relationship, a friendship, with the pastor. And, it is natural for the pastor to want to have a friendship with us, at least with many of us.

These relationships get us into awkward spots more often than not, however. Pastors often learn this before parishioners do. They remember from their former parish what happened then. Unfortunately, parishioners are more often the ones to be puzzled and let down when the pastor "cools it," and puts up a barrier to continued closeness.

It would be helpful and healthy for us, pastors and parishioners alike, to acknowledge together the peculiarity of these boundaries, the joy and danger they represent for us. And then to proceed carefully. Graciously. Forgiving, freeing and moving on, when the attempt at friendship falls apart.

When we do not have clear, shared expectations of the relationship, we create a big vacuum that all of us can dump our own expectations into. That causes more than misunderstanding and hurt feelings. It increases the possibility for all sorts of boundary violations.

### **Setting limits is hard!**

Pastoral ministry is, in many ways, a limitless profession. Pastors are always on call. The pastor's home may be the church's house. Events that are social occasions for most everyone else in attendance are working occasions for the pastor.

Trips to the grocery store turn into mini-counseling sessions when the pastor encounters a member in crisis, crying in the produce department over news of a family tragedy. An evening out becomes the council meeting agenda-planning session when the pastor runs into the chair of the council in line at the movie theater.

Pastors have a hard time setting limits on themselves. They feel a sense of urgency and responsibility that comes from the call of Christ to "Go! Tell! Serve!" Pastors want to save everyone, reach everyone, console everyone, protect everyone, include everyone, take care of everyone. Isn't this the command of Christ?

"Feed my sheep." Pastors are ready to go, to feed them, all of them, this very day.

Pastors, generally, are highly motivated to serve. They become pastors in the first place because they feel called to bring healing and hope. They want to give whatever and whenever it is needed.

Pastors expect the phone to ring in the middle of the night. They leave town on vacation, with one eye looking back over their shoulder, prepared to turn around and rush to a bedside, a funeral. Rumor has it, pastors get speeding tickets in disproportionate numbers as compared to the larger population. "I'll be right over," they assure us. We know that. That's why we call.

"What can I do? How can I help?" Pastors stop at traffic accidents. Pastors seem to have antennae that pick up on sadness and anxiety. They catch us on our way out the door. "Is something the matter?" Pastors seem to know things other people just don't see. There is no limit!

We have a history of expecting pastors to “be all things to all people.” Pastors internalize this expectation, and others: “Go into all the world.” “Take up your cross.” “Lay down your life.” “Wash one another’s feet.” “Go the second mile.” “Sacrifice.” “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” “Follow me!”

“Love, love, love, love!” “Serve, serve, serve, serve!” Jesus is their model, for heaven’s sake. They want to do everything! To be everything! There is so much to do! “The harvest is ripe,” “Go, ye....”

Pastors have a sense of needing to do these things, much of it personally. And this is not all bad. But it is impossible. And it can be dangerous.

Many pastors have taken time to reflect on their approach to their work. They have evaluated their motivation and their own needs. They have been able to step back and make some critical decisions, to set limits. They have learned to trust others to share in the ministry of the gospel. This is healthy, even essential.

When pastors do not set boundaries—limits—on their own work, around their own personal lives, they burn out. They begin to seek satisfaction for personal needs in their professional settings, because this is the only setting they know. Their deep needs for self-esteem and security are not met in their compulsive work habits, so they look elsewhere, usually close at hand, for other ways to satisfy their emptiness. They begin crossing sexual and other intimate boundaries. They “latch on to people” in the parish, needing to be needed, needing attachment, needing intimacy, from wherever it seems easiest.

Pastors who do not set limits, or those who disdain limits in ministry are at risk for committing serious boundary violations, including sexual abuse.

## **PART THREE**

### **KEEPING THE CONNECTION SAFE**

#### **Mutual respect for boundaries**

We were enjoying the children's zoo on the Saturday before Easter. My husband happened to glance up and notice our mayor, admiring the baby bunnies with his young daughter. We were enormously tempted to say something to him. Both Dave and I had "business" we might have liked to take up with our mayor at that moment. Such access!

To our everlasting credit, we didn't say a word. We didn't even interrupt their reverie to point him out to our daughter, or to offer an intelligent observation, "You're the mayor, aren't you." I am so glad we didn't. That time was too precious for him. I am glad we helped to preserve it for its intended purpose: time for the mayor to be a dad.

Pastors, like everyone else, are responsible to set appropriate limits around themselves (so they are not all used up), and for themselves (so they do not use others). It is important for parishioners to be alert to signs that this is not happening.

For their part, parishioners can accept responsibility to be careful to respect the pastor's healthy boundaries. Don't call on her day off with a routine question. Don't invite yourself and your son along on the pastor's yearly camping trip with his son. Save your comment about the worship committee for "office hours," instead of offering it when you see her with her children at the park.

If you call at dinner time and the answering machine picks up, you can leave a useful message and be glad your pastor may be taking time alone, or with family or friends. If your pastor is not responsive to your social invitations, it may be that the pastor is very careful about maintaining the boundary that clarifies your relationship together.

#### **You call this work?**

Discerning and keeping healthy boundaries in pastoral ministry is complicated even more by the varied nature of activities carried out by the pastor in the name of ministry. Pastors do the most amazing things in the course of their weekly responsibility!

How many professions do you know of where a trip to the museum is work? Sunday dinner? Bowling? Your wedding reception! And also the hospital visit. The wake. Crisis counseling in the produce department of the grocery store. Lunch at the deli. Coffee at the diner. Meetings over pizza. Midnight trips to the emergency room.

Because we are friendly with our pastors, and because many of the things pastors have to do, or are expected to do, we also choose to do, we often forget that the pastor was not as free as we were to choose to attend or not to attend this or that meeting—or the Young Adult's outing to the beach.

Nor does the pastor experience even the trip to Great America in the same way as the others do. It is the pastor's professional responsibility to participate, usually giving leadership and providing a personal example of "faithful service and holy living."

It is helpful to remember that your pastor is actually working at the Harvest Festival, even though he may be sitting with you and having fun. He will need another evening out with friends. Remember that the pastor is not having a day off while skiing with the youth group, even if her own daughter is along. She will need time off another day.

## **What about the single pastor?**

Single pastors have an especially complex time clarifying and maintaining boundaries.

For a single pastor, especially in a small town or rural community, the congregation may provide the only real sense of family, friendship, community and simple social contact. The pastor may look to members of the congregation for practical help, in moving and doing other tasks often otherwise shared with a spouse. The boundary between work and personal life becomes more fluid and blurred.

The single pastor is often expected to have more time to work, more time for relationships with parishioners. Often, a social occasion may include some specifically work-related discussion or activity and then some that seems entirely personal.

It seems so much easier to interrupt, or join the pastor when he's all alone. "I bet he needs company." Maybe, maybe not. If he does need company, it just may need to be someone with whom he can really let down his hair. He works for you and with you. It is hard, then, to completely relax.

Most single pastors sincerely appreciate their congregation's attempts to care for them, to provide them with human contacts, mealtime companions, perhaps household assistance. Single pastors often move to a new town without any friends or family to provide support and human contact. It can be a very lonely life. Invitations to join your family for supper, to watch a softball game, or to sit down over coffee are often cherished.

This is one of those fuzzy boundaries. And these relationships will work out just fine, until they don't.

"Cynthia" had just accepted the call to serve as pastor in a small, close-knit town. She was delighted that the council took seriously its stewardship of the parsonage and made several repairs and did some needed redecorating before she arrived.

On moving day, she was relieved to find a crew of willing workers ready to help unload her belongings, set up her bed, and bookcases, and provide much-needed company. She enjoyed their stories about life in the community, their advice about where to shop and what to avoid on the menu at the local cafe. It felt like a good start.

Two weeks later, she was startled out of her wits very early one morning, coming down the stairs to see one of the trustees helping himself to toast in her kitchen, and reading the newspaper, taking a break. He had been down in the cellar already, working on a plumbing problem she didn't know she had.

It was, after all, "his" house, he explained when she asked why he had let himself in. The church owned the house, and he was in charge of the property committee, therefore, he would stop in whenever he wished. Besides, she was all alone and he didn't want her to feel neglected. He would take care of her.

Her sternest prohibition did not deter him from entering again, several times. Finally, feeling invaded and overwhelmed, she brought up the matter to the congregation council. After some discussion, they agreed to take the keys away from the property committee chair, reassign him to other duties and agreed that the house was the pastor's house so far as the matter of privacy and safety were concerned.

This story of the boundary violation experienced by one pastor is not unlike the experience of other pastors who find their space and their time invaded by well-meaning, or sometimes disturbed members of the congregation. Single pastors are especially vulnerable to this kind of phenomenon, and women are more likely to experience it than men. This council was wise to recognize the pattern of disrespect in the property committee chair, and to take steps to protect and respect the boundaries of the pastor.

### **Dating your single pastor**

Dating, in any case, is very tricky. It is exhilarating and scary, making yourself vulnerable, as you get to know another person and explore options for a future relationship. Dating your pastor is even trickier, a risky business! It is hard work. It can have devastating consequences.

A date with your pastor may seem an exalted honor at first. But it is the beginning of a new and different, and probably irrevocable change in that pastoral relationship. You will never see your pastor in the same way again. And your pastor will never see you again simply as “one of the flock.” Regardless of whether you ever go out again. Or whether you discontinue the dating relationship under even the most amiable of terms.

My first meeting with “Steve” and “Nancy” to prepare for their wedding was moving along as I planned. No big surprises. Then, I asked how they met. His answer intrigued me.

“She came in to the health club where I worked as a trainer. I thought she seemed nice and I was interested in dating her, but I have a very strict policy: I never date members of the club.”

I asked why not. “I could never date a client,” he explained. “That would set up a new kind of relationship between us and I could never see her again as a client. It would be unprofessional. I couldn't be her trainer after that.” I could tell by the tone of his voice that it all seemed perfectly obvious to him. “It simply wouldn't be right.”

Thankfully, he soon was offered a position at another club. On his last day, they made a date. And their relationship changed forever.

There is no honorable or appropriate way for a married pastor to date members of the congregation—or anyone other than his or her spouse. And there is no appropriate way for a single pastor to date married members of the congregation—or anyone who is married.

However, many single pastors are drawn to single members of the parish. Often, these are the individuals they know best and find attractive. Shared values, goals, backgrounds, and interests are common. Single pastors dating parishioners is a time-honored tradition in some communities. Many times, single pastors seem to have few other ways of meeting prospective dates, or any other friends at all.

Single pastors dating single parishioners involves a “dual relationship.” The couple will have two different sets of responsibilities and expectations, sometimes with competing demands or



conflicting needs, with one another at the same time. They will, in effect, have two different relationships with one another, going on at the same time. This can make life very complex!

It will not be easy. Most observers and leaders discourage these relationships in the strongest possible terms. They usually do not work out. The parishioner often ends up feeling uncomfortable and needing to find a new congregation. The pastor often loses credibility and realizes that it is time to move on. Distraction, disruption, gossip, dissension are common. The congregation pays more attention to the dating relationship than to its mission.

If you are inclined to date your pastor, first, check out your motivation. Stay in touch with your feelings. It may be worthwhile, and the relationship may lead you to marriage. But be careful.

Whether you are the one to initiate the dating contact or not, you will want to seek counseling from a good therapist, counselor, or another pastor. Do not become isolated within the congregation. Stay close to trusted family, friends, and supports. Listen to their counsel, especially when it conflicts with any pressure you may feel from the pastor.

Under no circumstances should you allow the relationship to be kept secret. There is no good reason for this. If the pastor insists on secrecy, you have to wonder why the relationship is being hidden, and from whom—other dating partners of the pastor?

Unfortunately, a great deal of clergy sexual abuse occurs within relationships that the parishioner assumes are “dating” relationships but are kept secret “for the sake of the ministry.” In fact, the ministry—and the relationship—will be much healthier when the dating relationship is known, at least to some members of the congregation.

Dating the pastor involves the risk of making public a relationship that one often wants to keep very personal and private. The irony is that the non-secretive nature of your relationship is actually in your, the parishioner’s, interest.

All of us know pastors and friends who have met and married during the time the pastor was serving the future spouse’s congregation. Female and male clergy have met and married their partners in such circumstances. And many of these relationships are strong and healthy and have been established upon firm foundations of mutual trust and respect. For every one of these stories with a happy ending, however, there are many more with awkward, angry, devastating endings. And these endings are public, too. The consequences are far-reaching and often spell the end of the pastor’s ministry in that place. The parishioner may be blamed for this and so loses a sense of safety in belonging to that community of faith. People choose sides and the whole congregation loses its focus on mission. It can take some time to recover from this disruption.

If you are considering dating your pastor, male or female, learn about how you are vulnerable in relation to your pastor, and seek to discuss it with your pastor/date. Seek out someone who has had such a relationship and ask what they can teach you. Encourage your pastor to find another pastor, supervisor, mentor, or therapist to provide perspective and a safe place to do evaluation.

Decide what risks you can take, what level of ambiguity you can stand. If you believe you must take this risk, if you truly believe that this may be the person to spend your life with, proceed with prayer and the openness and expectation of needing to find another pastoral relationship to guide you.

## **Who is responsible for whom?**

It is good for congregations to reach out and be supportive of their pastor, to honor her for her work's sake, to help make her job easier and more pleasant. However, it is also important that congregations not feel responsible for taking care of the pastor.

Your pastor has access to other resources (however hidden or forgotten they may seem to be) that are to serve this purpose. Your pastor is responsible for seeing to it that his or her needs for support and friendship are being met, elsewhere. The pastor should not become dependent on the congregation. This will derail the ministry.

Take time to identify and encourage healthy boundaries. You may want to suggest other sources of assistance, friendship, and support for your pastor.

The pastor is always responsible for maintaining the appropriate boundaries of his or her relationships within the congregation. It is the responsibility of members of the congregation to respect the appropriate boundaries of the pastor, and to be alert to make sure that one's own boundaries are not being overcome.

The congregation council has supervisory responsibility for the work of the pastor, according to the constitution. A mutual ministry or other such committee may be a good place to share concerns that arise. In the event of serious concerns, the synodical bishop is available for consultation.

## **The time to clarify healthy boundaries is now**

Create a process for monitoring the boundaries in your congregation. This can be informal and unobtrusive. Perhaps two or three people (depending on size of congregation) can be acknowledged within the council or mutual ministry committee as responsible for staying alert and being available to hear any concerns. These people need to be chosen by the council, or mutual ministry committee, and the pastor, in consultation. They need to be well-respected and trustworthy.

Several specific steps are listed in the final section of this resource.

## **Responsibility for the boundary**

Because the pastor has responsibility for the relationship that comes from the specific commitments and expectations of that ministry, it is always the pastor's responsibility to make decisions about the relationship—the nature, kind, or quality of the interaction—based upon those commitments to the parishioner and the church's expectation: to make Jesus known.

Every party to any relationship has a personal responsibility to proceed in a healthy and loving fashion. None of us is ever free from all responsibility in any given relationship.

However, in the relationship between a pastor and parishioner, the pastor has more than personal responsibility for his or her behavior; the pastor has a responsibility to the office, to the church, and to Christ, for the sake of the purpose of that relationship. The pastor is accountable to the expectations and guidelines that allow for him or her to be there in the first place. The pastor has a sacred, vocational responsibility to uphold the commitments and expectations that gave rise to the relationship.



Every parishioner is urged to be alert and attentive to maintaining the appropriate boundaries in relation to your pastor. However, in times of crisis—confusion, depression, other illness, and sorrow—it is reasonable for you to trust that your pastor will faithfully carry out this responsibility, and will not take advantage of your impairment or vulnerability.

This church provides a means of holding its pastors to account for this sacred trust. If your trust has been violated, your bishop is available to hear your concerns and to take appropriate action. Your synod has a policy for responding to complaints and concerns about sexual abuse and other boundary violations. You may call your bishop's office and request this assistance, or you may call a trusted friend, another pastor or leader in the church.

*If You Have Been Sexually Abused or Harassed... A Guide to Getting Effective Help in the ELCA* is a helpful booklet, produced by the ELCA Commission for Women. (800-328-4648; order code #69-5115, \$2.00)

## **Discipline safeguards boundaries**

Some boundary violations are more easily prevented, guarded against or observable. Some boundary violations arise out of transitory conditions in the life of the pastor which can be more effectively cared for and the violations stopped. Some boundary violations warrant permanent removal from the clergy roster. This is especially true of behaviors that arise out of deep and psychologically disordering distress within the life of the pastor.

The process of discipline in this church is intended for the protection of God's people and of the gospel ministry.

The processes of discipline are usually undertaken through the office of the synodical bishop to discern the extent and effect of certain behaviors, and then to make measured decisions regarding the accused pastor, based upon whether or not the person is a trustworthy steward of the office of ministry, its privileges and power.

Detailed information about the process of discipline in the ELCA is found in Chapter 20 of the *ELCA Constitution*, available from Augsburg Fortress, 800-328-4648, item order #23-9526 (with binder, \$12.95) or (without binder, \$7.95): *Constitutions, By-Laws, and Continuing Resolutions*, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

A resource entitled *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline* has official standing in this church, describing the causes for bringing charges and the kinds of discipline that can be administered to clergy and all rostered leaders. It is available from the Division for Ministry, 800-638-3522, ext. 2880.

Another document, *Vision and Expectations for Ordained Ministers in the ELCA*, provides additional description of the clear expectations of this church. Order #69-9440 from Augsburg Fortress, 800-328-4648 (\$.75). The companion piece for associates in ministry is #69-9441 (\$1.00)

*Rules Governing Disciplinary Proceedings Against An Ordained Minister, a Rostered Layperson, or a Congregation of the ELCA* is an official document, detailing the process, available from the Office of the Secretary of the ELCA, 800-638-3522, ext. 2800.

## **Upholding the integrity of the gospel witness and protecting the people of God**

For the sake of the integrity of gospel ministry, this church holds its pastors accountable for actions undertaken in the context of professional relationships. All interaction between pastors and parishioners is within this context. We do not want to undermine the message of the gospel or the witness of the church. We do not want anyone in this church, or anyone who comes seeking its ministry, to be harmed in the context of relationship with its pastors.

Processes of discipline are in place to help this church provide a safe connection for the people of God to the gospel. When pastors fail in their responsibility for maintaining this safe connection, the church is empowered to take action to remove them from those opportunities that enable them to use others and to derail the mission of the church.

Chase stood forlornly on the curb in front of his house, plaintively calling to the other children across the street. They were noisily playing soccer and he was all alone. As I turned into my driveway and saw him there, I heard him call out, "Hey! I have some candy. I'll give you some if you come over." And then he upped the ante. "I've got some money. You can have some. Come here and get it."

My heart went out to my 7-year-old neighbor. Why was he standing there all alone? The other kids were running, carefree, having a great time. Perhaps his mom was gone and he knew he couldn't leave his yard. Or perhaps she had grounded him. I had to know.

"Chase, what's going on? Why are you here all alone?" I asked. He didn't hedge or hesitate a bit, "I was kicking the other kids and Mrs. Zaphel sent me home."

What a wonderful response. Honest. Straightforward. And, in tone, he was contrite.

This is discipline. Chase was removed from the game because the game was not safe with him in it. Chase was not removed because he is a bad person. And certainly not because he is a bad soccer player. And not even because Mrs. Zaphel worried about being sued if he hurt anyone.

Chase, bless his heart, was removed from the soccer game because the person in charge had determined that the game was not safe as long as he was in it. She did not want anyone to get hurt. She could not trust Chase any more to refrain from kicking the other kids. He was kicking them hard; it was not a happy sight. Mrs. Zaphel was responsible to provide a safe environment for the children to play and the environment was not safe when Chase was in it. Simple as that.

This said nothing about Chase's eternal value, or his abilities as an athlete, or his value as a person. He was still a neighbor. Still a child of God. But not any longer trusted to be a soccer player at Mrs. Zaphel's house.

And even after he is forgiven, he still may not be trusted to play soccer at Mrs. Zaphel's house.

Discipline of pastors is a matter of removing individuals from environments where they can harm others. It is about safety: Providing or restoring a safe connection between the people and the gospel.

It is not a comment on the pastor's eternal value and worth. It is not a commentary on their fine preaching or other skills for ministry. It is a careful determination, by those individuals responsible for the safety of the people and of the gospel, that this person cannot be trusted to refrain from hurting others by violating important boundaries.

This discipline is distinct from the matter of forgiveness. The offender may be truly sorry, but still not free from the overwhelming temptation to hurt others, or to lie, or steal, or whatever the offense may be. We can forgive an offender and still not sanction their free and unfettered access to and participation within the community.

Being a pastor is a privilege, not a right. And it is the right of the community of faith, the church, to make decisions about who is trust-worthy to serve in that position of responsibility and power. When serious offenses are committed, the church has the responsibility to remove the offender from the position or place that provides opportunity for that offense to be carried out.

These boundary violations may be sexual, or fiscal, or related to other ethical breaches, or heresy. All of them are dangerous.

## **PART FOUR**

### **WHAT IS CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE?**

Clergy sexual abuse is a boundary violation. Sexual activity in the context of a relationship between parishioner and pastor is an improper and harmful use of that relationship. Clergy sexual abuse violates the sacred purpose of the pastoral relationship.

#### **Trusting the boundary to hold**

We come to pastors, we listen to and trust them because we believe they have resources we need, gifts and wisdom to enrich our life: insight that will provide guidance, compassion that helps us to know God's own healing power. We come to pastors expecting something to happen—something blessed, holy and life-giving. We come to pastors somehow expecting to encounter God—God's will, God's love, God's forgiveness, God's judgment, God's power.

We come in trust—that pastors will use all of their professional resources for our benefit and the gospel's, to help us, to bring healing, hope and life eternal. We trust them to limit their behavior, to act in ways that serve us and the gospel, based on respect for us and our needs, their commitment to the gospel, and their professional responsibility to the church.

We reveal intimate hopes and fears, needs and transgressions to pastors, not for their own information or prurient interest, not to provide sermon illustrations, entertainment, or food for thought, and certainly not to feed their fantasies or somehow meet their own deep needs. Rather, we bring these parts of ourselves, indeed our whole selves, to our pastors so that they can help us truly to believe that God has forgiven us and frees us to walk in newness of life.

We tell of our hurts and wounds, our secrets and dreams, not for the sake of benefit to our pastors, but so they can help us to see the healing spotlight of God's love shine on our sorrow and fear, transforming it to joy and hope. We reveal our weakness and vulnerability to our pastors not so they can exploit and bend us to satisfy their own longings, but so we can find a way through the present darkness and move safely into refuge.

#### **Sexual boundaries are essential for safe connections**

Now is the time to decide never to have a sexual relationship with your pastor. Most pastors never become sexually involved with parishioners. However, we know from painful experience that some pastors do become involved in a sexual way with parishioners, and the consequences are, almost without exception, devastating for everyone.

Some individuals assume that sexual relationships between a pastor and parishioner are always the result of a seduction by the parishioner. This is not the case, as we know now for sure.

Most of the sexual contact between pastors and parishioners is initiated by the pastor. It is the invasion of an alien agenda into an especially purposeful relationship, a crash that results from a pastor attempting to drive, as it were, in someone else's lane.

The pastor may be trying to ignore his or her professional role and drive in the lane marked "peer" or "just a guy" or "lonely person." Or the pastor may be squeezing into a lane virtually on top of someone else's space, crashing into that person, stealing the space away. Tragically, the

crash results in much more than superficial damage. All too often, the parishioner is run off the road—into a ditch of doubt, depression, fear, betrayal, and shame.

This behavior is a violation of the boundary established to protect and fulfill the purpose of the pastoral relationship. It is the misuse or abuse of a space dedicated to one sacred purpose, warping it to serve an unintended and destructive purpose.

### **What behaviors are considered clergy sexual abuse?**

Clergy sexual abuse is the term we use to describe a wide range of behaviors and activities that are sexually explicit, physically intimate or suggestive, or sexually charged. These may include sexual intercourse, other genital sexual activity, other physical contact that is sexual in nature, sexual language, suggestions, confessions, looking at sexually explicit or suggestive material, and other behaviors that carry sexualized energy and intention. Clergy sexual abuse is sexual activity and/or contact between pastors and parishioners, or between clergy and those individuals who look to them for pastoral leadership and care. Even those behaviors which seem relatively innocuous may be extremely harmful to certain individuals, thus all sexualized activity is off limits because it is impossible for the pastor to know in advance what the implications of that behavior may be for any given parishioner.

This sexualized behavior is clergy sexual abuse. It is more than personal misconduct, more than personal sin; it is the abuse of power, of resources, of privilege and trust. It violates the church's norms, and, in most cases, its standards, and expectations.

Clergy sexual abuse is the pastor's failure to be responsible for the boundary that is entrusted to pastors to preserve. It is stealing the trust of parishioners, stealing the purpose of the pastoral relationship and directing these to one's own needs and desires. It steals the self-respect, dignity, and concerns of the parishioner. It robs the church of its role as a place of sanctuary, safety, healing.

Clergy sexual abuse is the often deliberate intention of the pastor to use the resources of the pastoral office, and the relative vulnerability of the parishioner in the context of a pastoral relationship, to satisfy personal needs and desires rather than work purposefully for the benefit of the parishioner.

Whether or not the sexual behavior is intentionally deceptive or coercive, whether or not the sexual behavior is carefully planned or develops accidentally, casually, carelessly, it is still abuse because of the misuse of the resources, or power, of the office.

### **What is the responsibility of the parishioner?**

We know that we have to drive defensively these days. It is not enough for us to follow the rules of the road and keep from being a safety hazard to others. The reality is that we have to be on the alert, constantly watching out and dodging others who venture where they don't belong.

While the pastor is always responsible, by virtue of the church's expectation, to maintain the safety of the boundary of our relationship, it is important and reasonable for parishioners to be on the alert, too, prepared to safeguard the integrity of the pastoral relationship.

This boundary is to provide safety for the parishioner in the relationship with their pastor, assurance that the relationship can proceed according to its purpose. The pastor/parishioner

relationship exists for one purpose: to help the parishioner see Jesus and know God's purpose and power.

Sexual contact between pastor and parishioner does not ever serve this purpose.

Your pastor has not come to your congregation to have sex with parishioners. Sexual involvement between parishioner and pastor is not gospel ministry. And gospel ministry is the only thing the pastor is there for. It is as simple as that.

The only reason your pastor has come to your congregation to be your pastor is: to be your pastor. This is not so silly a statement as it sounds. The pastor has not come to be a sexual therapist. Not a surrogate lover. Not a sensual artist. Not a needy, wounded soul, seeking satisfaction for sexual longing. The pastor has come to be your pastor.

You have every right and the personal responsibility to say "No!" To maintain that boundary. To keep the connection between you safe, dedicated, and focused on its purpose.

It is not appropriate for your pastor to initiate or engage in sexualized activity or behaviors with you, or any other parishioner. It is never appropriate for your pastor to do this. It puts up a barrier between you and the gospel. It distorts, perverts, undermines and redirects your trust in the gospel.

Pastors may become especially vulnerable to transgressing boundaries, or allowing their own boundaries to become violated when they are going through periods of personal distress and/or illness. It is particularly important for parishioners to be alert, cautious, and considerate at such times.

If your pastor engages in sexualized activity with parishioners, your pastor is not doing what he or she was called there to do.

### **Why is this boundary so important? Why is this sexual contact so dangerous?**

Sexual intimacy and involvement is a profoundly intimate, precious, and sacred part of human life. It is precisely because of the great value of sexuality in our lives that we seek to respect and guard our safety in the context of sexual relationships. It is ironic that those who guard this boundary are often perceived to be "against sex." In fact, the opposite is true. Sexuality is so important, we seek to reserve it only for those relationships where mutuality and unconditional love, trust and respect, enable us to give and receive this gift fully and freely, as God has intended. It is not a means to any end; it is an end, to be enjoyed, in itself.

Pastors who seek sexual relationships with parishioners generally are seeking to satisfy something else, in addition to or other than, the sexual feeling of desire or lust. Pastors who seek sexual contact with parishioners choose these relationships precisely because of their feeling the need to dominate, to exercise power and control, to hold sway over someone. The sexual activity is a manifestation of a deeper and more complicated longing. This may or may not be a conscious attitude, and it is rarely obvious, initially, to the parishioner.

Often, unfortunately, the pastor who engages in sexual relationships with parishioners does, in fact, engage in sexualized relationships with more than one parishioner. These relationships may be concurrent, consecutive, or a series, over a long period of time.

None of this may be apparent during the course of the relationship, especially in its early days. The pastor may seem kind and generous, warm and loving, solicitous and caring. It may seem initially like the best relationship the parishioner has ever had. The parishioner may not feel manipulated or controlled. It may seem to the parishioner that he or she is perfectly free to engage the relationship at a comfortable level.

Sometimes, however, there are warning signals and feelings of discomfort from the start. Sometimes the parishioner has a nagging feeling that something else is happening, at another level. This does not feel like “just an affair.” Sometimes the parishioner does indeed feel pressured, tricked, intimidated, and controlled from the beginning.

Some sexual relationships between pastors and parishioners are rape, criminal sexual assault. Some are felony child abuse. Some clergy sexual abuse is sexual harassment and/or other abuse, as described and prohibited by civil laws.

This sexual contact is dangerous because pastors use their unique combination and collection of resources in relation to the parishioner—

- role
- our traditional respect for clergy
- professional status
- authorization
- credentials
- colleagues
- conditions and circumstances that provide access and opportunity to be close to the intimate and vulnerable aspects of people
- professional and personal skills
- knowledge
- specialized education
- experience
- expertise
- personal characteristics and attributes (e.g. charisma, size, gender)
- awareness of the neediness and vulnerability of a parishioner

—all collectively known and operative as their power, to maneuver the relationship in ways that are intended to satisfy deep personal needs of the pastor.

### **But what about...? Is it ever okay?**

Sexual relationships between pastors and parishioners fail the parishioner 99.5% of the time. Perhaps one relationship in 1000 results in marriage, a lifelong partnership of fidelity, mutuality, joy and trust.



Counselors who have worked with scores of parishioners harmed in the course of sexual contact with their pastor will tell us, “it is never okay.” The risks are so enormous, the stakes so high, the pain and other consequences so devastating.

To be sure, all of us know of those rare exceptions where the pastor fell in love with a member of the congregation, and vice versa; they courted, married, and lived happily ever after. My cousin married the intern in her congregation 22 years ago and their commitment is still strong and joyful. A close friend from seminary married a member of her parish and all is well. It happens.

However, it is important to note that these relationships are exceptional not only in terms of their outcome, but in the ways they were conducted.

Neither of these relationships involved adultery. None of the participants were married already. They did not become sexually intimate relationships until marriage. Their courtships were conducted openly and honestly, not in secret. They involved relatively short-term pastorates, with lower stakes for the parishioner in the event of a meltdown.

Pastor and parishioner were almost the same age, educational level, status in the community, with similar personal skills, resources and experiences to draw upon, having no great trauma currently impairing judgment, and relatively equal levels of urgency (or lack thereof) about entering into an intimate commitment. They were healthy, happy individuals, free to accept the gifts and responsibilities of the relationship in mutuality. In both of these situations, time impact of a break-up on the congregation itself would have been less harmful, and the pastor would have been the one to move on, not the parishioner.

Most sexualized relationships between pastors and parishioners are not like this. Most sexual contact between pastor and parishioner involves adultery by one or both parties. Secrecy is a critical component. Blackmail and threats to reveal other transgressions, much less this one, are common. Shame locks the secret inside. A sense of guilt, either for participating in the relationship, or for “withholding this special gift from one of God’s special messengers,” or both, is common.

### **Crisis makes us vulnerable**

Many of these relationships begin at a time of significant crisis in the life of the parishioner, during the course of pastoral care and counseling. Death of child, spouse, or parent, suicidal depression, marital conflict or divorce, serious illness, financial crisis or conflict, or other significant stress, insecurity, confusion, transition and/or impairment provide opportunities for pastors to use vulnerability and weakness for their own purposes.

A magazine recently provided advice to a young mother who had developed a crush on her obstetrician. After explaining why these feelings could develop, and why it would be harmful to her to act on, or harbor them, several suggestions were offered as to ways of “getting over him.” One option was to talk with a clergyman. This is exactly the kind of setting where an opportunistic pastor could prey upon this vulnerability, shame her for having such feelings, and manipulate her into a sexual relationship that could “cure” her and direct her to more holy pursuits. It happens. Most pastors would not betray her trust in this way. But there are those few who would. This is a betrayal of that boundary, established to provide a safe place, a safe connection for her to God’s will and power.



Times of tragedy and loss, of uncertainty and anxiety are occasions of vulnerability. These are times to seek the counsel of a pastor. We have to be able to trust that the pastor will not attempt to take advantage of weakness and initiate an intimate sexual relationship that will end up only adding to our worries, hurt, and loss.

### **Other boundary violations also harm us; how is this one different?**

From time to time, we may feel “let down” and betrayed by pastors in many ways other than sexualized ones. We may seek counsel and receive condemnation. We may seek to make repentance and hear ridicule. We may seek forgiveness and find it vindictively withheld.

Our confidence may be betrayed. Our pastor may provide unwise advice, forget our name, miss appointments, fail to listen carefully, stumble clumsily or proceed awkwardly. All of these things hurt us. The feelings of betrayal in such instances are real, and may have long-lasting effects. Some of these may be cause for the church’s discipline.

These experiences are not likely to be as damaging to us, however, because of several important factors.

First of all, these are things we can talk about rather openly with others, certainly with close friends and family.

We can always find someone with whom to share our experiences of being badly treated by a public leader. Or to check out our sense of what is happening, “Am I crazy? Is it out of line? Do I have reason to feel upset?” There is no shame in this. Gaining perspective, airing and venting such feelings is a critical beginning to the healing process.

Second, these experiences are not likely to touch us at so deep and intimate a place.

Surely, for some, these other kinds of wounds will open and aggravate old tenderness. Healing will be slow. But it is possible.

Sexual betrayal stirs deep, primitive, and powerful feelings of shame and guilt within us. Many taboos are violated, none of them generally acceptable for conversation. The secrecy, the threats—whether perceived or real—intensify our experience of shame. There may well be no one we can tell about this experience, no one we feel safe trusting at this time. It may stay hidden and trapped within us for years and years and years.

We have been violated at sacred places: Our sexuality is precious and sacred; the church is precious and sacred. Both have been violated. Usually, there is some sort of rationalizing of the behavior, spoken by the pastor, that attempts to make it right, because God would want it to happen.

Third, the lies and deception—the betrayal, then—is not just about human interaction, it is a lie to us about God. Spoken by one authorized to speak in the community of God’s people, for God. Who, then, can I trust? Not even God, to provide a faithful witness. Not even God, to protect me from this.

The great tragedy of clergy sexual abuse is that God is used to perpetrate the violation. This is heresy and an abomination. “God would want you to have this gift...” “God will bless you for serving Him by serving me...” “This is from God, to you, through me...”

The pastor has been called to serve, to feed, to give God's people the gospel, the Bread of Life—not to give or impose the pastor's own body, desires, needs or weaknesses.

The prophet Ezekiel has powerful words about how the shepherds—the priests or clergy—of his time were failing to care for the sheep—the people of Israel.

Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?...no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them. (Ezekiel 34:1-10)

Ezekiel describes how the sheep have been scattered and left to fend off wild prey. The weak have not been strengthened, the sick have not been healed, the injured have not received care, and the lost have not been sought out. Instead of feeding the sheep, this text suggests that the shepherds have been devouring the sheep!

The sexual boundary around the pastoral relationship extends to protect that sacred relationship from sexualized behavior, energy, and attention because these damage, thwart, and terminate the effective purposes of that relationship. These behaviors will gravely hurt the individuals involved, those close to them, members of the congregation and the wider church.

### **Where to draw the line? What is the safe limit?**

Sexual contact between pastors and parishioners involves a range of behaviors. Often, but not always, it is intimidating and unwelcome.

These may include physical, sexual contact, including sexual intercourse. "Sexualized behaviors" can set the tone for later intimacy, or may constitute the sum of the boundary violation. These sexualized behaviors may include certain gestures, remarks, certain kinds of touch, looks, gifts, invitations, suggestions, a high level of availability ("you can call me anytime, I'm always here for you,"), self-disclosure by the pastor of intimate information, comments that are suggestive, inviting, probing, or beseeching.

Some of this sexualized behavior clearly is grounds for ecclesiastical discipline, according to the church's own documents (e.g. *Vision and Expectations for Ordained Ministers of the ELCA* and *Definition and Guidelines for Discipline of Ordained Ministers*). Others of these behaviors may be subject to ambiguous interpretations.

The ELCA has declared that "adultery, promiscuity, the sexual abuse of another, or the misuse of counseling relationships for sexual favors constitute conduct that is incompatible with the character of the ministerial office." Also, "the normative setting for sexual intercourse is marriage chastity before marriage and fidelity within marriage are the norm." (*Definition and Guidelines*)

Pastors of this church are responsible for knowing that the ELCA has *Vision and Expectations for Ordained Ministers* that state clearly:

"The expectations of this church regarding the sexual conduct of its ordained ministers are grounded in the understanding that human sexuality is a gift from God and that ordained ministers are to live in such a way as to honor this gift. Ordained ministers are expected to reject sexual promiscuity, the manipulation of others for purposes of sexual gratification, and all attempts of sexual seduction and sexual harassment, including taking physical or emotional

advantage of others. Single ordained ministers are expected to live a chaste life. Married ordained ministers are expected to live in fidelity to their spouses, giving expression to sexual intimacy within a marriage relationship that is mutual, chaste, and faithful.” (page 13)

These guidelines and expectations are very clear about many things, but less clear about other things. It may be difficult for others apart from the relationship to know just how to judge the interaction when intimate physical contact is not involved. Some behaviors are stupid, rude, and hurtful, and therefore inappropriate, but still may not be grounds for formal discipline in this church. Some sexualized conversation and some kinds of touch may straddle this fine line between sexual abuse and boorishness.

Even if a behavior is not formally grounds for disciplinary action—which may range from censure and admonition from the bishop to removal from the roster of ordained ministers—it is always the personal right and privilege of the parishioner to express discomfort or distress because of that behavior, to the pastor, and to expect that it shall stop. If it doesn’t stop, additional steps may be taken. See Matthew 18: 15-22. The council, mutual ministry or other committee, synodical bishop and/or others may need to become involved. Regrettably, you may find that even this does not stop the unwanted behavior, and may create other consequences. It is not just, it is not right, but you may find, for your own sake—for your spiritual and emotional health—that you need to find another church home.

The safe limit, the safe boundary in any relationship is one that does not feel disruptive or invasive, is mutually agreed upon and respected, and is respectful both of the people involved and of the purpose of their relationship.

Articles in the secular press have sought to clarify the distinction between “flirting” and “friendliness.” They suggest that sexualized energy and intention is sometimes communicated through the same behaviors that otherwise might be simply bubbly, effusive friendliness. However, batting eyelids, stroking one’s skin in a sensuous way, licking one’s lips repeatedly, “parading,” certain gestures of brushing one’s hair away, are usually flirting behaviors. Prolonged, direct and probing eye contact is provocative. Touching on intimate body places, stroking the hands or other places of the other person’s body—these are generally sexually charged and motivated behaviors.

If in doubt, they say, be alert. Do you feel sexual tension? Interest? Do you stop at a mirror before seeing this person, even though you normally don’t? Check your hair? Put on lipstick?

If you are preparing in a way that is out of the ordinary for you, you may be unconsciously gearing up for a sexual encounter, an exchange of sexual energy and interest.

Ask yourself, why am I doing this? What do I want? What do I need? Is this an appropriate place to seek it? Refrain from the sexually motivated behavior. And proceed cautiously through the encounter. Find support and care for your needs—later, from someone else. It is dangerous to invite the pastor to reflect on this with you; that itself is sexualized behavior and will change forever the character of your relationship.

Not all touch is flirtatious. Not all sexual comments are intended to invite a sexual response. Not all assertive friendliness is flirtatious. And not all flirting is inappropriate. But within the pastoral relationship, flirting is sexualized contact, and it is out of bounds.

Not all touch is flirtatious, provocative, abusive. Much is said these days about touching. Pastors are very afraid to touch parishioners, in many cases. Can we hug anymore? How do we share the Peace? Do we dare to put our arm around the shoulder of a hurting friend? Is it all wrong?

In my enthusiasm to share the Peace and to express hospitality and joy at being together, I reached out to hug my Estonian friend, Loona, with the same eager strength I had just used to hug my American colleague, Pat. The instant my arms encircled her shoulders I knew I'd made a mistake. Her body language was clear. I took stock of what I knew in general: none of my Estonian friends are huggers. As a rule, their physical boundaries are more formal, more restrained. I apologized right there on the spot, and we went on. No permanent harm done. And I never did it again.

Most people are sensitive enough to not make the same mistake twice. And most of us are thoughtful enough to apologize when we do transgress another's boundaries. And, again, most of us are able to forgive and to let go of the transgression, and not be permanently scarred.

The sympathetic touches, on the arm, the hand, the shoulder, meant to express concern, support, and encouragement are usually well received. And if not, we find a way to acknowledge the error, apologize if need be, and move on. This kind of touch is not the problem.

Touching that becomes rubbing, petting, patting, caressing, smoothing, or massaging is a problem. And any touch that takes advantage of individuals whose ability to send out those involuntary shudders or frozen reactions, or to verbally say, "no," has been impaired, for any reason, is a problem.

Touching that is sexual abuse is that which uses the parishioner to provide sexual pleasure and release, to express fantasies, to manipulate or coerce, to pressure or threaten, to invade and to hold. It may be fleeting or prolonged. It may be wanted or not welcome. And it may or may not be formally actionable, as a matter for discipline.

My Estonian friends and I find other ways to communicate our feelings of hospitality and joy. Smiling, laughing, earnest and honest words of concern and friendship, and prayer provide the means of touch that enable us to be close. And every now and then, someone gives me a hug, because they know that is important to me. I think this is the way it works in most respectful, mature relationships.

### **Who decides if it's not appropriate?**

It is not simply the matter of the sender's intentions that determine whether or not an action is sexually charged and uncomfortable to the one hearing or receiving it. The receiver decides if the behavior is unwelcome and unwanted, if it is provocative and disturbing, irrespective of the sender's intention.

In most respectful relationships, including in the parish, when this boundary of civility and respect is crossed, the matter is noted, forgiveness is sought, "I beg your pardon," "I'm terribly sorry; I offended you," even "Whoops! I made a mistake," and pardon is granted.

However, in abusive relationships, the intruder will not accept responsibility for the invasive behavior and its effect. Often, the behavior does not stop and may even escalate. The receiver of the offensive behavior is blamed for being too sensitive, too something, and is dumped with all responsibility for the way in which this behavior is experienced.

The offender may seek to justify the behavior by claiming it was provoked, solicited, or evoked in some way. This is not likely, but even if such was the case, it would surely not justify continuing an unwanted or inappropriate behavior. The violation remains a source of hurt and the trust is broken.

Sometimes this is as far as it goes. But even this kind of sexualized activity and energy can be enough to endanger and inhibit the pastoral relationship.

### **Different individuals respond in different ways to harassment and abuse**

Most parishioners will rebuff the pastor's unwelcome sexual comments and overtures. Many will feel unnerved for a time, awkward, and reluctant to seek out the pastor for any special care. Some may have difficulty in worship, squaring the sexually provocative behavior with the pious and authoritative visage in the pulpit, or at the altar. Some may determine to find another congregation, another pastor. Some may withdraw or stop attending. Some will decide this is the time to resign from the council or committee, to stop volunteering in the church office, to stop accompanying the pastor on shut-in visits. These individuals are not likely to reveal to others the motivation for these decisions.

Some parishioners will become angry, cynical about the church, perhaps for reasons that seem vague and confusing to them and to others. They may not be able to acknowledge the dissonance they are experiencing. They may become depressed.

Some will brush it off, "chalk it up," and forget it happened. Our response even to this level of inappropriate behavior will depend on our past experiences, our expectations, our state of being on that day, how long and how intense the behavior goes on, and so forth.

Some of us will be so frightened, scared, worried, intimidated, threatened, anxious, and depressed by this intrusion of sexual energy and attention, and the intentions of the pastor, we will be unable ever again to trust this pastor to provide ministry we need and expect. This is not our fault; it is simply the experience we have because of who we are and other experiences we have had.

We thought we were driving in one lane, marked "parishioner" and our pastor was in another, marked "pastor," but now—yikes! Here is the pastor!—crowding into this space we thought was reserved for our safety. And look, there is no pastor, in that lane over there, the one we thought was preserved for the pastoral relationship. The violation may well run us off the road. The crash may result in long-term injuries. Clearly, there is no safe place for a pastoral relationship anywhere in sight.

### **Sexual harassment is one kind of sexual abuse**

In the context of personal relationships, unwanted and unwelcome sexual attention—which we often call harassment—is out of bounds because it is rude, offensive, hurtful, degrading, and disruptive. In the workplace or school, in certain contexts, sexualized behavior is prohibited as sexual harassment. Specific behaviors have been identified as inappropriate for the workplace or school, and any violations are subject to civil discipline and remedy.

Sexual harassment has been defined as:

1. unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when
2. submission to or rejection of that conduct is used as a factor in decisions affecting an individual's employment or education; or
3. that conduct has the purpose or effect of substantially interfering with an individual's employment or education by creating an offensive, hostile or intimidating environment for work or education.

If these behaviors occur in the course of your work or educational life you have recourse to the civil courts. If your work place is the church, this civil violation will impact the way the church responds to your complaint. The employer of the pastor has responsibility for supervising the pastor and for responding to any civil charges of sexual harassment. Depending upon the exact nature of the behavior, it may also be grounds for discipline, according to the church's definitions and guidelines.

Whether or not the offensive behavior is technically sexual harassment and/or grounds for ecclesiastical discipline, if the behaviors are unwanted and unwelcome, it is entirely appropriate to seek to have them stopped. If a private conversation with the pastor does not bring a favorable result, further intervention may help.

When the behavior involves intimate sexual contact, threats, dangerous provocations or physical violence, outside support is essential.

### **Sexual exploitation is another form of sexual abuse**

Sexual exploitation occurs in some professional relationships when the counselor (or other provider of care) represents to the client that sexual involvement will be an integral part of the therapy or treatment, and that sexual contact with the counselor will help resolve the problems experienced by the client. This is professional exploitation because it misrepresents and abuses the professional purpose of the relationship. This is an abuse of the power of the professional position.

In some states, ordained ministers have been explicitly included among those providers of care who are legally at risk to commit sexual exploitation.

This sexual contact is exploitation even if the client agrees to, or even initiates, the sexual relationship. Is this fair? Is this right?

Yes, because the provider has a professional responsibility and the necessary resources to recognize what is going on, to take charge of the interaction, and to stop it from becoming dangerous to the client.

Exploitation is a technical category of abuse and generally applies only when a "counseling relationship has been established." Most pastors are not counselors, certainly most pastors are not trained counselors, even though they may provide counsel, comfort, and support. However, if the pastor represents to a parishioner that he or she is qualified to provide counseling, and continues to see the person regularly for several sessions, one may be able to argue successfully that a counseling relationship has been established.



If a parishioner feels the need for counseling to deal with complex emotional issues, childhood wounds, and serious disorders, it is best to ask the pastor for prayerful spiritual support during this process, and seek a referral to a qualified, certified counseling professional. If the pastor offers to provide this level of care, one needs to inquire about their credentials and education to qualify such care. Most pastors do not receive adequate preparation in seminary to provide in-depth counseling, although some do make it a specialization and receive additional training.

## **Clergy sexual abuse is misuse of power and resources**

Sexual abuse can include the wide range of behavior we have been describing. Sexual abuse is sexualized behavior that occurs in relationships that are not appropriately sexualized relationships. Pastoral relationships are examples of this.

It is sexual abuse because it involves sexualized activity, interest, energy, or intent. It is sexual abuse because it is a violation of the boundary between us, and quite importantly, it is abuse because it is the misuse of power and resources given by the church to the pastor for one purpose and one purpose only: to make Jesus known.

### **“Just” an affair or is it abuse?**

If two adults are conducting a sexual relationship, isn't this an affair? dating? courtship? Or plain old promiscuity? Why do we call this sexual abuse?

The realities of vocational responsibility and commitment and power are never absent from the relationship between a pastor and a member of the congregation.

The nature of the pastor's relationship with a parishioner is always a singularly purposeful one: to make Jesus known. It does not lie within the purpose or scope of gospel ministry to seek and carry on sexual contact with parishioners. It does not lie within the scope of gospel ministry to seek to have personal, intimate needs met by congregational members or by others who look to the pastor for spiritual guidance and authority.

We generally think of an “affair” as an adult relationship entered into by two mutually responsible and powerful, consenting individuals. Because of the added responsibility and power of the pastor in this relationship, it is never “just an affair.”

Besides, since when is it okay to have “affairs”?

As long as your pastor is your pastor, your pastor is always your pastor. This sentence may sound silly but the truth of it is very important. As long as that pastor is the pastor of your congregation, that person is your pastor. When the pastor becomes your lover, the pastor is still your pastor. Except that now your pastor will not be able to truly be a pastor to you.

This reality is experienced by the spouses of pastors every day. Much of the time it is not a serious problem, but when a crisis arises—either in the marriage or because of illness, death or other concern—the pastor's spouse finds it necessary to reach out for care provided by another pastor. If you choose to date your pastor, you will need to find another pastor right away, even if you continue to attend your church.



Pastors are called to congregations and other institutions to travel in and through that place in a lane clearly marked at the beginning: “pastor.” While the lane marker sometimes becomes a broken rather than solid or double yellow line, and sometimes the lane markers seem almost invisible, nevertheless, the lane is always there and the pastor is always in it.

### **What are the consequences of clergy sexual abuse? What happens when this boundary is crossed?**

Intimacy in this relationship is illusory. Secrecy and fear will inhibit trust and mutuality. We dare not confuse apparent access—the amount of time spent together—with quality of concern.

The parishioner will find, as thousands have, to their dismay and horror, that the pastor is not there for them in this relationship but rather, the parishioner is there for the pastor. It may not seem so at first, but this reality will come sooner, or perhaps, much later. Whenever it comes, the effect will be exceedingly painful and damaging of one’s ability to trust, to give and receive intimacy with others, to participate in the life of the church, and to know the joy of life in Christ.

The betrayal will come as the parishioner learns of the pastor’s other intimate involvements. He or she will feel the pain of rejection when the pastor terminates the relationship precipitously, as almost always happens, as word of it begins to seep out and threatens the minister’s security and status. The parishioner will feel terribly betrayed, let down, confused and insecure, uncertain of her or his own judgment anymore. The parishioner may become severely and clinically depressed.

In these relationships with a pastor, most women and men feel used, controlled, and manipulated even while the relationship is ongoing. They see how their own needs become clearly secondary to the pastor’s. They may feel special for a time, and may even feel—as the pastor may tell them they are—specially chosen and gifted to serve God in this unique way. But then they feel ashamed, deceived, and embarrassed.

Parishioners lose their congregations, frequently, and many friends. The secrecy of the sexual relationship with the pastor drives a wedge between those involved and other parishioners, their family and other friends. Often pastors deliberately set out to isolate parishioners with whom to have a sexual relationship, in order to cultivate a strong sense of dependency and loyalty and to remove them from contexts which might provide a healthy (but threatening) perspective on the relationship.

### **Faith and family consequences**

Even if the sexually intimate relationship ends without anyone else ever knowing, the parishioner will have lost a sense of being simply one among many. They carry this secret as a burden and move off to the edges for fear of suspicion and exposure, and out of a sense of shame. If, and when, the relationship is revealed, the pastor will hurt the parishioner deeply by denying it, or minimizing its importance, by rationalizing it or blaming the parishioner for it.

The congregation wants and needs so desperately to believe the pastor, they believe the worst of the parishioner. He or she is judged the guilty one. Even those who can assign a significant portion of blame or responsibility to the pastor will still feel the parishioner is guilty of being

the one who somehow caused or occasioned the pastor to fall. And if the pastor is removed, the parishioner is forced to bear the guilt, and is the scapegoat for the congregation, the one blamed and held responsible for the loss of the pastor. However irrational and improbable this all sounds, it is the course these relationships virtually always take.

One may well lose his or her marriage, close friends, other family relationships, the trust and respect of their children. Even if family and friends later come to understand how the parishioner was used and manipulated, this insight often comes too late for many friendships and family relationships.

## **Spiritual Consequences**

“How can I trust in God if God sends out messengers who use and betray people, who use and betray me like this?” Many parishioners victimized by clergy sexual abuse offer up this plaintive cry.

It is common for those betrayed by a pastor to leave the church, not only their own congregation but the church altogether. Some find their way back, many do not. Often, their families also become estranged from the church and from God.

The spiritual consequences of clergy sexual abuse are devastating. The parishioner has trusted the pastor not only with his or her own intimate, sexual self, but with his or her spiritual self. The pastor was trusted to bring God’s own Word and the life-giving Sacraments. The pastor was entrusted with nurturing a closer relationship between the parishioner and God. Often, the word of the pastor and the Word of God were intertwined. The pastor was one who spoke words of judgment, forgiveness, and God’s will. And now the parishioner has to wonder: was it all a lie?

In many relationships of clergy sexual abuse, the pastor represents to the parishioner that the sexual intimacy is, in fact, God’s will. Perhaps, so it is said, God has chosen this special parishioner to provide for the needs of the pastor. Or, perhaps it is to be a mystical means of God reaching out to care for this parishioner in a special way. The spiritual consequences in these cases are especially traumatic. The parishioner feels betrayed not only by an individual, but by God.

One writer has described this as “soul stealing.” Manipulating, deceiving a person about their relationship with God is a grievous sin.

Some relationships of clergy sexual abuse develop over a period of time, through periods of crisis or intense involvement with the pastor, perhaps as a key volunteer or leader. Here, too, the spiritual consequences can be numbing and far-reaching.

The parishioner victimized through such a relationship is unlikely to allow another pastor to provide needed care to assist in recovering from the abuse. This parishioner is likely to retreat from active participation in the life of the church, including worship. The victim then becomes cut off from the sacraments, from hearing the Word, the vitality of worship, the encouragement of the faithful.

Many such parishioners are left feeling angry, bitter, abandoned, undone. These feelings are intensified when the congregation blames, isolates, and shuns them when the relationship is disclosed.

The parishioner may lose his or her faith as a result of all of this. The very person—the pastor—trusted to bring a closer relationship to God, to carry God’s Word and Sacrament, is the same one who has so betrayed that trust, manipulating and abusing the parishioner, causing tension and wreaking havoc within his or her family and other relationships.

The name and the will of God has been invoked in the course of this sexual relationship. The parishioner was led to believe God intended this. And now he or she is left, unable to go to worship, to receive communion from these hands, unable to confess sin without a huge, unresolved bundle of shame.

Often, after the relationship ends, the pastor again invokes God’s name in pronouncing judgment against the parishioner and twists the circumstances around to infer that the parishioner has somehow failed the pastor, and, by extension, failed God.

How can God be believed, trusted, if God sends out servants like this? What power is there in the promise of new life in Christ when even those entrusted to carry this message are so weak and fragile, they prey on parishioners who come to them for counsel? How can one trust this message? This God? The parishioner is too beaten down to have faith at all.

All of these are consequences regularly experienced by parishioners who enter into sexual relationships with their pastors. They are wounded and victimized at the very core, in the depths of their souls.

## **Understanding the dynamics that make one vulnerable to clergy sexual abuse**

“I feel so stupid.” Those are common words from victims of clergy sexual abuse. “How on earth did I get into this?”

They are not stupid. They are not bad. They are vulnerable. And they are taken advantage of by pastors who use that vulnerability for their own purposes.

“Why didn’t I run?” “How did I get into this mess?”

“What is different about this relationship that made me vulnerable?”

The unique relationship between a pastor and parishioner comes into being when the congregation engages the resources of the pastor to provide for specific needs of that community.

Individuals acknowledge their need for pastoral guidance and care at points in their life when they recognize that they can’t satisfy their own doubts, or absolve their own sin, or let go of significant hurt, or make critical decisions without spiritual direction and the presence of the pastor.

These individuals need a safe place to bare their soul, to speak the unspeakable, to ask the unimaginable, to grasp the unfathomable. They need to reveal things that are embarrassing, shameful, distressing, and worrisome.

They need respect, acceptance, dignity, courage, encouragement, wisdom, truthful judgment, discernment, and forgiveness. They need competent, effective interventions, and useful recommendations. They need freedom and options.

More than anything, however, these individuals need the safety of that pastoral relationship, that place, and for that period of time, they need the total dedication of that pastoral relationship to the purpose of helping them resolve their crisis, make their decision, let go of the oppressing circumstances or find healing. They need to trust that whatever that relationship provides, it is devoted to their best interest and to the special needs they have now.

The parishioner's need for the pastor's skilled care and service makes that parishioner vulnerable, to some extent, more or less, depending upon a variety of factors in each situation.

If a parishioner comes seeking guidance in making a terribly complex decision, that person is acknowledging a certain level of vulnerability and dependence and the inability or reluctance to make a decision apart from the resources provided in that pastoral relationship; the contribution of the pastor is assumed to be helpful, wise, and true. If it wasn't, the parishioner wouldn't have called.

The extent of the vulnerability depends on the relative presence or absence of specific needs and conditions in the life of the parishioner, and the pastor, and the extent to which the pastor has the resources and conditions generally available to pastors.

### **Needs and expectations create conditions of vulnerability**

Different parishioners bring different life experiences of need, expectations, assumptions, and hopes into their relationship with their pastor.

These needs, expectations, assumptions, and hopes change from time to time. And they may change from one relationship with a pastor to the next, because of certain things about that pastor or because of one's experience with another pastor, or because of circumstances in one's life. A parishioner may be more vulnerable in relationship with one pastor than with another. And one parishioner may be more vulnerable in relationship to the same pastor than another parishioner in that same congregation.

Nevertheless, while the parishioner needs to be alert to the dynamics going on within, and often they are quite aware of these shifting dynamics, it is the professional responsibility of the pastor to make sure that the relationship proceeds safely and purposefully for everyone involved. Even when the parishioner is experiencing sufficient distress to make discernment and personal responsibility difficult to maintain, the pastor has a professional responsibility to maintain appropriate boundaries.

As a "shepherd," one of the responsibilities of the pastor is to establish and maintain a safe place, a sanctuary, for God's people, where they may care for the troubles of their life in honesty and openness. As the prophet Ezekiel writes, they are to be safe from wild animals, and certainly safe from the shepherds themselves!

The pastor is always responsible to safeguard the relationship, even when the boundary is pressed upon by the parishioner. It is never appropriate for the pastor to take the initiative to cross or violate that safe boundary.

## **What needs do individual parishioners bring to the pastor? (some examples)**

- hope for assurance of God's forgiveness in the wake of a serious transgression;
- spiritual direction in time of doubt, crisis, and isolation;
- guidance in making significant decisions, perhaps about continuing an unplanned pregnancy or working through serious conflict in a marriage;
- a young widow struggling with her feelings of attraction to a man and her sense of guilt about betraying the memory of her late husband;
- encouragement and support in the care of elderly and infirm parents;
- guidance in raising teenagers who seem to be drifting away from mom and dad and the values of their childhood;
- help in sorting through the issues of childhood sexual abuse and current domestic abuse, gathering courage to leave the relationship;
- confusion about one's sexual orientation; concern about the teaching of the church;
- social isolation, loneliness, disappointment in relationships, work, family life;
- needs to be needed, to be involved, to be a vital and important part of community;
- need for leadership by the pastor in community efforts to establish a safe haven from gangs and drug-dealers;
- careful attention to the moral questions raised by the parishioner's teenagers;
- communion preparation of parishioner's grade-school-age children.

[Note: most pastors are not trained counselors. They can be helpful sources for referrals to trained counselors and can help identify issues for further work with a qualified therapist, but should not provide in-depth counseling.]

## **Needs make us vulnerable**

Each of these individuals has significant concerns and crisis in their life. They do not feel themselves able to make decisions without support. They are seeking several things as they bring their wounded selves:

- someone to listen and hear deep concerns
- someone to affirm their values and beliefs
- someone to provide wisdom consistent with those values and beliefs
- someone to lend strength and courage
- someone to provide leadership
- someone to challenge and speak truth
- someone to point the way
- someone to provide "God's perspective"
- someone to pronounce absolution
- someone to celebrate growth
- someone to be accountable to, in God's stead

## **Conditions make us vulnerable**

Confusion, insecurity, uncertainty, doubt, worry, pain, fear, danger, panic, ignorance, naivetè, innocence, shame, guilt, anger, hate, urgency, isolation, illness, estrangement, love, zeal, hurry, resentment, bitterness, revenge, indecision, a sense of being overwhelmed and out of choices, and more...

Any of these feelings and conditions in the life of the parishioner may contribute to the vulnerability of the parishioner in relation to the pastor, and impair or blind good judgment.

The parishioner may feel willing to become a participant in the sexual relationship, or feel wary, reluctant, or coerced. In any case, the parishioner is vulnerable, in that condition of need, to the greater resources—or power—of the pastor. It is the pastor's responsibility to use his/her power to protect the vulnerability of the parishioner, not take advantage of it.

## **Vulnerability is relative, but absolute**

All of us are vulnerable, in every relationship. The relative extent of it depends, in any given pastoral situation or relationship, upon the strength of resources otherwise or also available to the parishioner, as compared to the strength of the resources available to the pastor.

The experience of vulnerability will be somewhere along a continuum from extremely dependent and impaired (even quite literally unconscious), through a middle ground (where most of us are), to the other side—where the parishioner has virtually the same resources as the pastor, and the capacity for decision-making, but still feels and is vulnerable to the authority and access to resources, to the power of the pastor in that relationship.

There are some factors, the absence or presence of which, for either person, will affect the balance of power in the relationship. We speak about the vulnerability of the parishioner and the at risk status of the pastor. Because the pastor always has the resources of the pastoral office available, (whether or not these are acknowledged and utilized appropriately), and because the pastor is always in charge of the interaction—even when it seems that the pastor is at risk of losing control over the relationship—the pastor can always say no.

The relative presence or absence of the parishioner's personal resources (or power) and the pastor's resources (or power), combined with the extent of the parishioner's need, and his or her relative well-being render the parishioner more or less vulnerable to the intentions and/or interest of the pastor. The relative well-being of the pastor affects the extent to which the pastor is at risk for crossing or violating the sexual boundary and perpetrating clergy sexual abuse.

A pastor with healthy boundaries will be less likely to attempt to violate sexual boundaries, regardless of how much power that pastor has. A pastor with unhealthy boundaries will be more likely to attempt to cross sexual and other professional boundaries, regardless of the amount of power available to use in that attempt.

## Sources of power for pastors

Some combination of the following set of resources is always available to pastors, indeed, this is what makes them pastors.

authorization	ordination
knowledge	skills
expertise	experience
tools	resource materials
characteristics	credentials
circumstances	opportunities
status	standards
accountability	supervision
colleagues	conditions
traditions	freedom
access	gifts/charism
role	expectations
respect/trust	commitments
faith	specialized training
awareness of parishioner's vulnerability	

and a combination of all this and more that the parishioner projects on the pastor

Add to this list some things that may be specific to any given pastor—resources in this culture that tend to confer power:

physical size	attractiveness
gender	race/ethnicity
social class	financial standing
able-bodied	physical strength
well-educated	intelligence
reputation	age
options	cleverness/cunning
breadth of life experience	
wide social contacts and many friends	
secure family relationships	
stable and healthy life situation	



The relative presence or absence of these resources, especially as perceived by a given parishioner and by the pastor, and then measured alongside the resources and conditions operative within the parishioner's life at that same time, conditions which make the parishioner more or less vulnerable—helps to answer the poignant question: “How could this have happened?”

### **Causes of vulnerability**

These are conditions—experiences, needs, feelings, crises, situations, concerns—within the life of parishioners that can make parishioners relatively more vulnerable to the misuse of a pastor's resources:

danger	threat
pain	fear
tragedy	grief
loss	panic
isolation	estrangement
illness	impairment
confusion	insecurity
uncertainty	doubt
anxiety	worry
shame	guilt
ignorance	naivetè
urgency	limited options
bitterness	resentment
hate	revenge
“overload”	overwhelmed
depression	narcissism
other mental illness and personality disorder	

Consider also the absence or presence of other resources (as listed above, for pastors,) and the assumption and expectation of the parishioner that the pastor will provide skilled care, in the parishioner's best interest, and you can get a rather clear idea of how vulnerable the parishioner is, within a given pastoral relationship.

## **Pastors have a specific responsibility to guard the greater vulnerability of the parishioner**

The very conditions that make the parishioner vulnerable in relation to the pastor are the problems or experiences that usually prompt the initiation of a pastoral contact. It is always the pastor's responsibility to manage or be in charge of the interaction, in order to provide safe and meaningful pastoral care to the parishioner.

Some parishioners are attracted to the power of the pastor and initiate the sexual behavior, or engage in behaviors that are welcoming and suggestive of sexual activity. This attraction and vulnerability is beyond the control of the pastor. But the pastor is still in charge of stopping it from developing further. Even when the pastor is not in control of the parishioner's expectations or projections, it is the pastor's job to be in charge of keeping boundaries in place. If this should somehow become impossible, the pastor must reluctantly but definitely end the relationship, and seek support from a bishop, colleague, supervisor, or other care-giver.

It is always the vocational responsibility of the pastor to safeguard the greater vulnerability of the parishioner within the pastoral relationship.

### **Protecting your vulnerability**

Most pastors understand and respect this important aspect of their vocational responsibility. Most pastors are trustworthy. Most pastors will never take advantage of the neediness of parishioners for personal pleasure or satisfaction. While all pastors make mistakes and are sometimes more effective in their work than other times, most pastors will do their very best to be helpful and faithful in good times and bad.

Clergy sexual abuse is not "just a mistake." It is a serious failure with serious consequences. Our church understands and takes this to heart. When we do encounter pastors who fail to accept responsibility for safeguarding our relationship, we do well to have internalized this simple message: "It's never okay."

### **Sexual harassment of pastors by parishioners or professional superiors**

Sexual harassment of a pastor can occur when a pastor is threatened with punitive action, retaliation, disruption or serious aggravation related to his or her employment if he or she does not engage in, or quietly endure, sexual advances or activity, sexual comments or behaviors that are unwanted, offensive, and disruptive. Sexual harassment can occur when the pastor is more vulnerable to the professional superior or to a parishioner.

In such a case, a supervisor, superior, senior pastor, or parishioner with significant resources (e.g. physical strength, age, status and standing in the community, influence, charisma, a strong and forceful personality) can coerce a pastor into a sexualized relationship.

Most often, sexual harassment of pastors is perpetrated against female pastors by senior pastors or other supervisors, and less often by parishioners with enough power to present a credible threat. Some female pastors have been stalked, and some have been raped. If you believe that this may be happening to a pastor in your community, your carefully considered expressions of support for her will be welcome. She will be experiencing all of the consequences that lay victims of clergy sexual abuse experience.

Most male pastors have significantly more power than they may believe to prevent and stop sexual harassment from happening to them. Cases of women attempting to sexually harass male pastors are actually quite rare. When these claims are made, one needs to look very carefully at the power dynamics involved. In most situations, the male pastor has significant resources available to thwart the development of such a threat, and to identify it as such to one's superiors, colleagues or council. Only in very rare instances could a male pastor be coerced into a sexually active relationship without having sufficient recourse to the resources to stop it.

When pastors do experience sexual harassment, this is not just a personal crisis. It is a crisis for ministry in that place. Its negative impact will continue until the truth of the situation is understood and the process of healing and justice is underway.

### **Clergy sexual abuse can happen to those who go to the pastor for counseling, or to anyone in the parish**

We tend to think of clergy sexual abuse as taking place primarily in a counseling relationship. Certainly, the pastoral counseling relationship provides for a high level of intimacy between pastor and parishioner, and is generally entered into during a period of heightened neediness and vulnerability on the part of the parishioner. Many instances of clergy sexual abuse do, in fact, develop in the context of a counseling relationship.

However, other individuals in the parish may be drawn into sexually intimate or uncomfortable relationships with a pastor.

Individuals in a variety of life situations and with a variety of roles in the congregation are vulnerable to clergy sexual abuse.

Some parishioners bring to the pastor and to the congregation their need simply to belong. They need friends, people simply to be with. People who share common values, beliefs, and backgrounds. They come in search of community, friendship, care, and concern. They seek Christian peers and guides who will provide a safe place to share something of who they are, what they love, fear, want, and long for. They need folks to walk with them, to share their mutual joys and woes. They need friends. Sometimes, they end up with just the pastor.

They do not need a sexual relationship with the pastor. It will only drive them away from others, into a tight, consuming, secretive bond. Isolated from the very people they need, they will be drawn away from that camaraderie and support. They will become very dependent upon the pastor, and then the pastor will let them down. And they will be alone.

Some people come to the church needing a place to contribute their gifts and talents. They seek to serve, give, and share. They need to teach, sing, pray, organize, cook, fix, paint, lead, or care for others. They need respect, appreciation, companionship, and room to give their gifts. Sometimes, they end up just serving the pastor.

They do not need a sexual relationship with the pastor. That derails their ministry, distracts and disorients them, and eats up their energy. It confuses and frightens them. The pastor takes all they had to give, and does not give what they need in return. They feel dumb, disillusioned, and disgusted with the church, too used up to contribute any of their gifts for a long time.

Some people come to the church needing to celebrate the power of God's love and forgiveness, and to feel its power more clearly in their life. They may need to make confession, to accept a discipline of repentance, and to be healed and renewed. They need good preaching, meaningful worship, challenge, inspiration, and guidance to help in being as faithful to Christ as they truly intend to be. They seek answers to perplexing questions, and the will of God for their life. Sometimes, they get the will of the pastor, instead.

They do not need a sexual relationship with the pastor. They will be drawn away from life with God into the personal life of the pastor. Their songs will dry up, harden into bitterness and anxiety. They will feel shame and disgust. They will ache from trying to please, feeling depressed at having directed their attentions to the pastor instead of to God. They will drift away, if they do not crash into a ditch, away from the church, from joy, from God, depressed and confused.

It is difficult to say, in many cases, just what exactly made that parishioner so vulnerable. It may be a combination of many factors. The tragedy is: they were used, misled, deceived, and betrayed. And they wonder if they will ever get over it.

## **What happened?!**

Thousands of victims of clergy sexual abuse, who range in age from very young children to octogenarians, are still trying to understand and recover from the wounds of that abuse—suffered yesterday, or even years and years ago. They ask again and again, “What happened?”

“What did I do? What did I say?”

Blaming themselves. They will rehearse their own part endlessly.

Also, they ask,

“Why did he do this to me?” “What brought us to this point?” “How could he betray my trust like this?” “What was he thinking?” “Does she have any idea of how this feels to me?” “How could someone like this be ordained?” “Does anybody know this is going on?” “Has this ever happened to anyone else?” “Is this pastor doing this to anyone else?” “Why is he even a minister?” “Does anyone know how horrible this feels?”

“Who will help me? Who will believe me?” “How could I have been so dumb!?” “Why, when I said no, didn't he stay away?” “Why didn't I run?” “Why didn't I tell anyone for so long?” “What do I do now?”

And, to a person, they ask, “How can I keep this from happening to anyone else?”

Understanding what happened is important. It is a big step for them on the road toward healing. And it is a big step for us all on the road to prevention.

These parishioners made assumptions, mostly reasonable assumptions. They trusted their pastor. They believed their pastor. Even when their pastor said unworthy and unbelievable things.

It is important for us to hear what they heard, to know what they were told. Their pain may be our teacher. If ever you hear these words, run!

These parishioners went to the pastor assuming that “this person will have information I need, information about God!” What happened?!

## **Seduction/Exploitation**

These are some examples of what parishioners hear or experience from pastors who are seeking to become sexually involved with them. They are painful for us to read. They are very slightly altered from what was originally said because I do not want to add further injury to anyone by knowingly printing the actual words of their private pain. However, they are not fictionalized.

“God wants you to experience this very special gift, from God to you, through me.”

“In order to learn how to be sexually satisfied with your spouse, I need to teach you how to receive pleasure.”

“We need to re-create those painful experiences, only now, as an adult, you can have sex with someone you trust.”

“I know you want to get over your phobias about sex. This will help you.”

“I am so glad we understand each other. We are both so lonely. I really believe that God has sent us to each other for this moment in time.”

“This is a very special way for you to serve God, by caring for the needs of the pastor. You must never tell anyone else.... They won’t believe you.”

“But this kiss is different. It comes straight from God!”

“I do love you and I want us to be together for always. But we just can’t tell anyone about this right now.”

“If you help me out with this (need for sexual intercourse and intimacy), I promise not to sabotage your work here at the church.”

“You know how important you are to me, but my ministry is so important to so many other people here, too. We have to keep this secret.”

It gets worse.

## **Rationalization**

And then there are the voices that parishioners hear inside their own heads, trying to make sense of this seduction and behavior.

“The pastor can teach me how to live. The pastor is holy. The pastor will help me be holy.”

“I know the pastor wouldn’t ask me to do something that isn’t good for me.”

“I feel safe with my pastor because he is close to God and carries God’s love to me. It is almost as if God is right here with us. That’s what he says. He says God wants this for me.”

“The pastor knows what he is doing. He says it is helpful in curing me of this terrible shyness and insecurity—even though this seems weird!”

“The church wouldn’t have ordained her if she wasn’t ready.”

“I can allow the pastor to touch me in ways that others never could. I know he would never hurt me. Or do anything really harmful.”

“I know this is wrong, but he’ll tell my husband about my affair with \_\_\_\_\_ if I don’t go along with this.”

“This doesn’t exactly feel right. But, then, it is so nice to be with the pastor! I feel special—Don’t I?”

“I’m desperate! I’ve tried everything. No one will even listen to me anymore. I don’t have anyplace else to go.”

“I’ve never needed this kind of help before. I have no idea of what to ask for, or what would be helpful. You’re the expert. What should I do?”

“I don’t even trust my own feelings anymore, much less my thoughts. If you say so....”

“I’m not so sure, but sometimes God had stranger plans for other people. What can it hurt?”

“Maybe it is wrong, but it feels so good! He said he’ll always love me. Nobody said that before.”

“Fine, whatever. I’m not worth much anyway, It’s all been taken before.”

“Good grief! What is happening? I’m overwhelmed.”

These statements are painful. But they are true. Every one of them is true. And if you should have occasion to hear them for yourself: Stop! Run! Get help!

These are statements of abuse, the misuse of power, trust, and expectation. They are the voices of our sisters and brothers in the church. A grievous wound was inflicted on the life of these victims. And we have all been wounded, the entire body of Christ.

## **Healing is possible!**

Healing from clergy sexual abuse is a process that takes different amounts of time and different forms for different people. For some, it is a straight line, for others it zigs and zags, in fits and starts, over many years.

Healing can begin as those involved come to understand just what has happened. It is difficult to acknowledge that the relationship was something more, or something other than an affair, a strictly personal matter.

Healing can happen as those around the victim understand what has happened. Victims need advocates who move with them through the healing process. The earlier a victim is heard and believed and provided with appropriate care, the more effective and smooth the healing process is likely to be. When parishioners are ignored, intimidated, blamed, shunned, or made the subject of gossip and ridicule, their healing is thwarted.

It is very important for the victims, and for all of those who seek to care for them, to understand that their pain is caused not only, and not primarily, by the failure of a personal, private relationship but by the betrayal and the abuse of the power of the pastoral office.

Many victims of clergy sexual abuse leave the church not only because of their feelings of betrayal and abandonment by the pastor, but also because they feel abandoned by the congregation and the larger church when word of their relationship with the pastor becomes known. They are blamed for the relationship, and for the departure of the pastor, and for any subsequent disruption in the congregation.

Even when the name of the victim (or victims) is not disclosed, the speculation about his or her identity is difficult to bear. Rumors, finger pointing and scape goating are common. In those rare instances when the identity of the victim is beyond anyone's guess, many anonymous victims and their families feel just as uncomfortable for fear of being found out, and from listening to the grousing, character assassinations, assumptions, and accusations made unsuspectingly in their presence.

### **What we know can help us!**

As more of us come to understand the dynamics of clergy sexual abuse—what it is, why it happens, what makes parishioners vulnerable, and why pastors are always responsible for the safety of the pastoral relationship—we will become more helpful to those in our midst who have suffered this abuse.

Instead of blaming, suspicion, and assumptions, victims of clergy sexual abuse need the sanctuary of a community that offers compassion, trustworthiness, and acceptance. Most victims will still feel a measure of shame, failure, personal responsibility, and remorse. As the congregation understands what has happened, it is better able to provide a climate that fosters self-acceptance.

This resource is not a handbook for healing. However, as we come to know more about the dynamics of clergy sexual abuse, we can move toward healing with deliberate and measured steps. Additional resources about healing are available. Some of them are listed in the bibliography at the end of this material. Local resources may be available through a rape crisis hot line, or from a center providing care to victims of other sexual and violent abuse. Your synod office may have suggestions to help you. A mental health center, employee assistance program, YWCA, counselor, or therapist can help you. The ELCA can assist in connecting you to helpful resources (800-638-3522).

“If there was anything we could do to keep this from happening to anyone else....”



## **PART FIVE**

### **PREVENTING CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE**

#### **Knowledge is Power**

The best prevention is education. As parishioners learn about the dangers of clergy sexual abuse, they are empowered to act to protect themselves, to set and maintain boundaries, to recognize danger, to be alert and attentive to their own safety and that of others around them.

Abuse prevention is effective when those who are potential victims, or are close to potential victims, have three key resources:

- assertiveness and knowledge about the potential for danger
- a strong peer network
- trust in the authorities to seek justice

With this resource, the ELCA seeks to give to its members some important tools to assist in preventing clergy sexual abuse. As we all gain understanding about the dynamics of the problem, we can share this understanding with each other, and have greater confidence that the concerns we express about our experiences of abuse will be met with compassion and determination to help. We will have others with whom to talk, others we can trust to understand our experience of danger and distress. That will help us to be assertive in resisting abuse and/or in seeking the appropriate intervention by church authorities.

The ELCA is taking steps to respond to clergy sexual abuse with policies and procedures that bring healing and justice to those affected, and by moving to discourage and prevent further incidence of this abuse. We endeavor to create a climate of “zero tolerance” for sexual abuse in the church.

Training of pastors and other church leaders regarding the dynamics and dangers of boundary violations of all kinds, especially including sexual abuse has been going on for several years and will continue. Support networks for pastors, continuing education, mentoring and other means of caring for pastors and for ministry are ongoing.

However, as much as we may try to provide pastors with information, encouragement, and warnings about the need to maintain appropriate boundaries, we will not be 100% effective. Some pastors will continue to fool the system, and perhaps even themselves, about their fitness and abilities for ministry. Some pastors will head down this path only after many years of good ministry, perhaps after a crisis or as another symptom of “burn-out” or depression. We may not become aware of the danger until the damage is done.

## **Education for laity is essential**

All too often, this education begins with a crash course after a congregation experiences the trauma of a pastor's sudden resignation or as the rumors and accusations start flying. This may be a difficult time for learning, because emotions are running high and defenses are up. However, this may be a good time for learning, too, because the need for understanding has never seemed more urgent. The problem is not hypothetical or "out there," it is real, it is here, and it is very disruptive.

It is never too early to become informed about the importance of maintaining appropriate boundaries in congregational life, and the process may very well provide enriching side benefits along the way.

## **Disclosure about abuse that has occurred**

For many of us, information about a current or recent situation involving boundary violations is the first time to hear about the dynamics of clergy sexual abuse. A beloved pastor resigns suddenly, or is requested to take a leave of absence, and the bishop comes to provide much needed explanation of what is happening and why.

Except in unusual circumstances, it is always important for the leaders of the congregation to receive pertinent information about circumstances that led up to the pastor's departure (or leave). We call this "disclosure."

We may have been reluctant to provide—or to listen to—this disclosure of pertinent information because of fear that our talk be construed as gossip, an invasion of privacy, even slander. The behavior under discussion, however, is not private life activity of the pastor. Because it involves parishioners, it is a work-related issue, even if the behavior itself is something we think of as intimate and personal.

It is extremely painful to hear about the sins, or alleged sins, of someone we hold in great esteem. It is common to vigorously deny the possibility of any such claims.

While the behavior itself may be very private, intimate and personal, the fact that it occurred in the context of the pastor's work—the pastor's relationship with a parishioner—makes even such normally private activity a work-related activity, subject to the church's discipline and other procedures, including disclosure.

By violating the boundary between one's personal and professional life, by engaging in an off-limits, personal behavior in the context of a working relationship, the pastor himself or herself has placed this activity within the realm of public consideration.

Disclosure of certain facts is essential if the congregation is ever going to be able to move beyond this traumatic moment in its life. The incomplete pieces of information, the uncertainty and confusion, the conflicts between those who have heard one story and those who have heard another—all of these will tear a congregation apart and derail it from mission and effective ministry for years to come. Shrouding and shielding this secret will preoccupy some, while conjecture and assumptions will consume the energy of others. You cannot imagine just how powerful this disruption is until it comes to haunt your congregation.

However painful it may be to face certain matters, open and honest consideration provides a way to move through to a future that is re-focused on mission, doing the whole work of the gospel. While distortions and rumors may persist, the truth is heard, and the congregation can proceed with integrity.

Disclosure may increase the short term pain and trauma caused by clergy sexual abuse but experience demonstrates that disclosure also speeds and deepens the experience of healing for all those affected—the primary victims, their families, the congregation, and others surrounding the offending pastor, including other clergy and members of the larger church.

Inasmuch as acknowledgement of sin, confession, is the first step in repentance, it is likely that disclosure is helpful for the offending pastor, as well, in the long run, however painful.

A further benefit of disclosure is that any other victims, who have not come forward, may now feel that a safe climate exists for them to tell of their experience to the bishop. This is important, not only for the sake of their healing, but also because the church needs this information in order to help assess the gravity of the pastor's misconduct and the potential for future service. Disclosure, as awkward as it is, is an important part of ministry, helping the church reach those in distress with love, healing, and reconciliation.

Disclosure necessarily includes providing information about the dynamics of clergy sexual abuse, answering the inevitable questions, “But why isn't this just an affair? Why is the pastor being held responsible? Doesn't it ‘take two to tango’?” In the course of providing this information, the seeds for future prevention are sown, as others learn about the harm caused when sexual boundaries are violated. Other potential victims learn to watch out for and to avoid sexual involvement with pastors.

### **What exactly is disclosed?**

Disclosure does not mean spilling the whole story to anyone and everyone. The synodical bishop and staff generally work with congregational leadership to determine what information is shared, when, and with whom. Every attempt is made to protect the privacy of all involved individuals, so much as is possible or reasonable. No irrelevant or knowingly inaccurate information should be shared. The name(s) of the victim(s) and other identifying information about them is generally not disclosed.

The bishop generally does not make any disclosure until after a careful investigation of the initial charges yields information to warrant further action.

When allegations are brought to the bishop, and a subsequent investigation does not result in any evidence or cause to believe the allegations are true, and if the pastor denies the allegations and it is determined by the bishop that the charges are without basis, no disclosure is made and it is unlikely that the congregation will ever hear of the matter. Normally, anyone contacted in the course of the investigation, as a source, will be notified when the allegations were not sufficient to cause further action. If an accused pastor is cleared of all allegations through a discipline proceeding, and the allegations have been disclosed, the synod generally will use the same vigor to restore the name of the pastor as was engaged earlier to pursue the charges.

As an aside, the reason we rarely hear of cases where pastors are accused and then found “not guilty” is because those cases are dispatched privately, in the course of investigation, before we even know there are charges. If the charges are made a matter of public information, it is virtually without exception that a rigorous, careful investigation has determined sufficient evidence or other cause to proceed.

Disclosure is appropriate when the pastor

1. admits to sexual misconduct;
2. resigns the call or resigns from the ELCA clergy roster following accusations of sexual abuse;
3. is placed on leave or is temporarily suspended in response to allegations;
4. is removed from the clergy roster or suspended as the result of a formal discipline proceeding; or
5. when criminal or civil legal proceedings are initiated against the pastor.

To protect the privacy of those harmed by the pastor, generally only the following information is disclosed:

1. the fact that the pastor has been accused of, admitted to, or been found guilty of committing sexual misconduct;
2. the gender of the complainant(s);
3. whether the complainant(s) was an adult or a minor at the time of the offense;
4. whether the complainant was a member of the pastor’s congregation or a person to whom the pastor was providing pastoral care.

The information may also indicate whether the misconduct was heterosexual or homosexual. If the sexual abuse occurred in a prior setting, this may also be disclosed.

If the pastor has denied the allegations, that fact will also be disclosed.

The bishop (or bishop’s staff) normally provides this information first to the congregational leadership and then works with those leaders to determine a plan for providing appropriate information to the entire congregation. Letters from the bishop, meetings, small group settings, and forums may be utilized for this purpose.

Generally, it is important for other pastors in the area to receive this information. They may be called upon to provide care for members of the primary congregation, or to respond to public media or other expressions of concern.

This important process provides crucial education about what has happened and builds a strong foundation for preventing future abuse.

## **Practical steps we can take to prevent sexual boundary violations**

### **1. Begin with education.**

Use this resource and others in adult forum, council, and other settings to provide information about clergy sexual abuse. Present a positive picture of the purpose of the pastoral relationship, and then talk about why it must be dedicated to that purpose alone. It is very helpful to include overall discussion of boundaries and their importance. Talk about the pastor's professional responsibility to preserve the safety and purpose of the pastoral relationship. And, finally, talk about what happens when that purpose, or boundary, is violated.

Highlight the concern for safety and integrity in ministry relationships. Clarify that parishioners always have the right and a personal responsibility to say "no!" to all sexualized behavior from clergy.

Your synod bishop or staff may be able to suggest speakers/teachers to assist you. You may ask to hear from a victim/survivor, a counselor or therapist, or a leader in a congregation where clergy sexual abuse has occurred.

Purchase materials (see bibliography) for the church library that teach about the dynamics of this problem, and publicize them. Announce in the church newsletter that the council is learning about clergy sexual abuse and creating a congregational policy. Include youth in your education and planning efforts. Make copies of this resource available in tract racks or other prominent spots in the church building.

Publicize information about preventing other forms of child and sexual abuse. The local YMCA, YWCA, Scouting office, or child protection agency may have excellent resources available. Other related resources are listed in the bibliography.

Ask the pastor and other worship planners to include prayers for "victims of sexual abuse, including clergy sexual abuse," in the prayers of the church from time to time. When there is public disclosure of a complaint in your vicinity, pray for that congregation and all those affected. Ask the pastor to preach and teach about respecting healthy boundaries in all relationships.

Publicize and make available the synod's policy and plan regarding clergy sexual abuse. Acknowledge the pastor's presence at any required (or optional) training and education events. Publicize the names and telephone numbers of any people designated by the synod to receive complaints or to hear of concerns.

Whenever you have educational events or discussions, take care to provide a safe and respectful environment. Assume that victims of sexual abuse, of many kinds, will be in the room.

Some victims of sexual abuse may have come to your congregation after experiencing abuse elsewhere. Some of this pain may be very fresh, still undisclosed to anyone, and some survivors of abuse may have been on the journey toward healing for a very long time. Be very sensitive and careful about what is said and how it is said.

You may want to ask for assistance or review of your plan from a rape crisis counselor or another provider of care to victims of sexual abuse. You may want to have a counselor present to be alert to signs of distress. You may want to plan to offer a time of confidential debriefing and care right afterward for those who do experience distress. That care provider should not be the pastor.

## **2. Talk with your pastor.**

Use this resource, the manual for ELCA mutual ministry committees, and other resources as you work with your pastors and other professional leaders to explore your mutual concern for healthy boundaries and strong ministry. Work together on ways to strengthen that ministry. (Some specific suggestions are included later in this section.)

Clarify your expectations, including “no sexual contact with parishioners” and your commitment to take all complaints seriously. Look together at your synod’s policy for responding to allegations of clergy sexual abuse. Assure the pastor of your commitment, also, to cooperating in any appropriate ways with synod authorities in completing a full and fair investigation. In the unlikely event of false accusations, church policies provide for exoneration.

Include this discussion in any subsequent Call interviews for a new pastor. Ask your bishop about a pastoral candidate’s previous experience: Have there been any complaints of sexual abuse? Of other serious boundary violations? Some states now require that these inquiries be made.

## **3. Prepare a policy and a plan for responding to complaints.**

Work with your synodical bishop or someone designated by the bishop’s office to prepare a policy and plan for dealing with any complaints or concerns about sexual boundary violations.

Learn about your synodical policy and ELCA discipline procedures. Make use of ELCA Constitutional provisions and the material provided in *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline, Vision and Expectations for Ordained Ministers*, and *Rules Governing Disciplinary Proceedings Against an Ordained Minister*. Your plan will need to complement and conform to ELCA provisions, where required. You may wish to consult with an attorney and/or your liability insurance carrier.

*Managing Risks: First Steps in Identifying Congregational Liability* by Richard B. Couser is a helpful resource. This is a 48-page workbook for congregations to use in reviewing a variety of areas, including employment practices, volunteer selection, and supervision. It is available from Augsburg Fortress at 800-328-4648, for \$7.95 and is order code #23-2303.

While congregations often become concerned about clergy sexual abuse because of legal liability concerns, and while these concerns may be quite reasonable, the primary concern of the congregation is to be about good ministry, and to be stewards of the gifts of ministry provided them, by clergy and laity alike.

Your plan and policy will need to reflect this commitment. If you stress only that you are seeking to minimize the risk of lawsuits, you will send a message to any victims, or future victims, that their credible allegations are unwelcome and will set them on an adversarial path with the congregation.



Most victims of clergy sexual abuse do not want to sue anybody. They want healing and justice. They become interested in civil suits only when it seems to them that the abuser, the congregation and the larger church fail to take their complaints seriously and to do whatever is necessary to prevent the abuse from happening to others.

Provide copies of your plan, or information about it to the entire congregation. Provide for the training of people designated to receive complaints and care for those who bring charges. Regularly and widely publicize the names and telephone numbers of those who are designated to receive any complaints or hear concerns. Be prepared to use the policy and plan in the event of any complaints, and to be held accountable to it.

Clarify and publicize the congregation's "zero tolerance" policy regarding the violation of sexual boundaries.

Consult with your synodical bishop as you develop your own plans and policy. Your synod should have a policy in place at this time.

#### **4. Skip the laundry list of "don'ts."**

Rigid "laundry lists" of forbidden acts—for example, no touching, no hugging, no closed doors, no home visits—all have the effect of creating a climate of fear, anxiety, and mistrust in the congregation. A negative mentality builds up as everyone becomes preoccupied with what can't be done. A stubborn, obstinate spirit develops, as laity and clergy both determine to "break those dumb rules." Rules replace relationships as a focus of concern.

The congregation begins to see itself as over against the pastor. The pastor begins to view the congregation as a potential source of threat to his or her future ministry—a host of parishioners who will prompt them to do what they dare not do.

Everyone becomes fixated on what is forbidden. An atmosphere of dread replaces the climate of mutual respect.

There are some times when hugging is exactly the right thing to do, when a hug is safe and appropriate. There are times when a home visit is essential and safe.

These behaviors themselves are not the problem. They may become symptoms of a problem, or they could lead to problems. But, they are not, themselves, the problem. When we put all of our attention on these behaviors, we are distracted from the deeper issues and concerns.

Rather than create a list of forbidden behaviors, follow these guidelines:

- Clarify and publicize the congregation's "zero tolerance" policy for sexualized contact between pastor and parishioners.

Any parishioner knows at all times that she or he has the right to insist on maintaining that boundary, and knows that she or he has peers in the congregation who understand the dynamics of the problem and could help in resisting or intervening.

In the event of ambiguous behavior, the parishioner has some tools to use in response (e.g. a sense of permission and encouragement from the larger community to resist or stop the behavior, confidence that the pastor will not be unfamiliar with the concern and will respect it, language to describe the feelings of uneasiness, knowledge of the congregation's "zero tolerance" commitment, and its plan to take seriously any concerns expressed about inappropriate behavior).



If any behavior is uncomfortable, it is understood within the congregation that the parishioner or pastor can acknowledge their discomfort, even at that moment, then request that the behavior stop, and request an apology. The parishioner or pastor has a reasonable sense of confidence that assertiveness on his or her part will result in appropriate restoration and respect of the boundaries of that relationship.

If it is safe to say “no” or “stop, now!” then we can take considered risks—a careful touch, or hug—that serve the purpose of the pastoral relationship. These behaviors should not be undertaken lightly, however. Each person should seek to be alert to any signals of discomfort or discouragement regarding these actions. It is best to ask permission before initiating these actions, and to remember that it is not the giver, but the receiver of the action or behavior who determines whether or not it is welcome and/or comfortable and/or appropriate.

- Declare in advance the congregation’s intention to follow its policies and plans in the event of a complaint.

The pastor is on notice: “You can’t fool us. We know what abuse is.”

The education process will alert parishioners to potential methods of seduction and desensitization, and prepare them to resist. Parishioners will have new understanding about the dangers to them and to the congregation if they become sexually involved with their pastor.

In the event of a complaint, the congregation has expressed its intention to be determined about following its plan and policy, and, if appropriate, about cooperating with the synod in its disciplinary action: “We will care for and not blame the victim(s). And we will provide due process to the accused, but we will not shield that pastor from the accusation or the consequences of misconduct.”

This intention, clarified in writing, in policies, plans, education, and in prayer, will provide a more effective deterrent than any other list of don’ts.

This public understanding will poison the relationship between the pastor and the congregation only if the pastor resents the boundary and is uncertain about maintaining it. Or, if an unhealthy congregational dynamic promotes mistrust and suspicion of pastors, for any variety of reasons. In this case, you can be sure that other problems will require attention and outside intervention.

Church secretaries and other staff are often the first to sense, or to actually know, that the pastor is involved in inappropriate activity, including clergy sexual abuse. Your plans and procedures need to provide a way for them to provide appropriate notification of their concerns, and safety if they do.

These next several preventive measures promote conditions that encourage strong and healthy pastoral ministry.

## **5. Encourage your pastor to take care of personal needs.**

Encourage your pastors and other professional leaders to take good care of themselves. Encourage them to find the appropriate sources of personal care and counsel. Your congregation council president or lay vice-president may receive information every year about the Employee Assistance Program; you may need to encourage the pastor to make use of these or other similar resources.

Just as sexual intimacy violates an important boundary in the pastoral relationship, other personal intimacies shared by the pastor can divert and even dissolve the pastoral relationship in a congregation. While members of a mutual ministry committee and others in the congregation may express their concern for a pastor, they cannot serve as counselor, therapist or confessor to the pastor. This does not mean they have no opportunity to serve these needs, however.

Congregation councils or mutual ministry (personnel) committees can play an important role by encouraging and providing reasonable time and opportunity for the pastor to receive this ministry of personal care, therapy, and support from doctors, counselors or therapists, spiritual directors, colleagues, other professional peers, seminary and other teachers, and the bishop.

In the event that one of your pastors presents a complaint of sexual harassment, perpetrated by another pastor or a parishioner, take steps to discern the truth of the complaint and, in the meantime, provide for pastoral and other care to all staff during this period. Do not let your worries about legal responsibility prevent you from arranging for this care. Trained providers and consultants should be retained to assist you.

#### **6. Make sure your pastor is taking time off.**

Twenty-four hours a week is not enough time away from the responsibilities of this ministry.

Encourage the scheduling of meetings and appointments to provide for some free evenings every week. Encourage the pastor to set aside some other block(s) of time, besides a day off, for recreation. Honor the pastor's commitments to these times apart. Discourage all but emergency phone calls on days off, during meal times, and in the evenings. Post a schedule that clearly indicates these healthy boundaries around the pastor's personal life.

#### **7. Provide adequate vacation time.**

Time at conferences and meetings out of town is not vacation time. Pastors are always "on" while they're in the community, even on a day off. Despite our best intentions, this boundary will be invaded. It is all the more important, then, for pastors to have enough time away, totally off, so that rest and refreshment can be sufficient to carry them through the next season of intense ministry.

#### **8. Provide appropriate time and funds for continuing education.**

The ELCA has a strong commitment to life-long learning for pastors, and to the support of ministry through various kinds of continuing education. Some churchwide funds are dedicated to this purpose, and congregations and pastors also provide part of these funds. This investment in healthy and skilled ministry will be returned more than generously.

Ask your pastor to share the fruits of this learning. Honor it, as you build the schedule and as you distinguish this from vacation.

## **9. Provide adequate and fair compensation.**

Most pastors are not seeking to get rich. But they do hope to provide a reasonable lifestyle for themselves and their families.

Most synods provide guidelines for compensation of pastors and other professional leaders, based upon many factors, including years of professional service, education, and responsibilities. It can be very difficult for some congregations to meet these guidelines, but diligence in working toward that goal is important.

Inadequate compensation can lead to feelings of burn-out, and some clergy then develop attitudes of entitlement to other privileges. (This behavior, in any case, is not justified, but your objective is to prevent it.)

## **10. Discourage your pastor from being a lone ranger. Be alert to isolation.**

Encourage your pastor to spend time with colleagues, to attend cluster and conference meetings, to participate in synodical activities. This is part of the work schedule, not time off. Your pastor needs the mutual consolation and support that only colleagues can provide. Your pastor needs the wisdom and advice of peers and mentors. The ministry of your congregation will benefit.

Many pastors are loners, lone-rangers. One profile characteristic of pastors who violate sexual boundaries is that of isolation from colleagues, supervisors (e.g. the bishop or dean), and spiritual guides. It is in your best interest to have your pastor involved and accountable within the larger community of the church.

## **11. Clarify expectations of single pastors.**

If your pastor is single, take time at the beginning of the ministry, or now, apart from a crisis or experience of misunderstanding, to clarify expectations of healthy respect for boundaries, in the event of a dating relationship with a parishioner.

Counsel regarding these relationships may be found in this resource, and in *The Cry of Tamar* and *Sex in the Parish*. (See bibliography.)

## **12. Encourage your pastor to “get a life!”**

Single-minded devotion to duty often is rewarded in our culture. We express admiration for those who “never give a thought for themselves,” who are “on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year,” who “eat, drink, and sleep” their work. This is especially true of pastors.

We know, however, that this is unhealthy, regardless of one’s profession. Everyone needs other relationships, other interests, other activities.

Many pastors find their lives entirely taken up with the relationships and activities they have established within the congregation. Many of these relationships and activities are fulfilling and enjoyable. However, they are still work-related. Pastors need friends and interests totally apart from their work life, just as all of us do.

Exercise, hobbies, musical, recreational, social, civic, and other activities, apart from the parish and apart from parishioners, provide appropriate places for your pastor to be “just one of the guys, or gals,” and to develop other talents, build needed personal friendships, express other important commitments, and establish day-to-day support networks that strengthen the pastor’s personal and professional life.

In order to do this, your pastor may need to leave your town and drive some distance.

### **13. Family first.**

Honor your pastor’s commitment to family. This really deserves a higher place on our list because it is of vital importance!

Respect the boundaries that are intended to protect pastors and their families from relentless interruption, public scrutiny and harsh judgment. Honor the need for privacy and safety in the home and within the bounds of personal and family life.

While this family life should be honored simply for its own sake, it is also true that healthy family life reduces the risks of boundary violations and provides for stronger, healthier ministry.

### **14. Help establish and respect healthy boundaries throughout the congregation.**

Set clear and healthy boundaries for yourself. Be aware of and take care of your own needs, in the appropriate places. Be firm about resisting behavior that seems inappropriate to you. Be especially firm about resisting behavior you had decided in advance to resist. Talk with others, in and out of the congregation, if you have concerns.

Bottom line: don’t let your boundaries be violated. And don’t violate the boundaries of others.

Honor your pastor’s commitment to setting appropriate boundaries, for the sake of a healthy pastor and healthy ministry. The pastor needs a best friend, and so do you—but you will not be able to serve that purpose for each other. Refrain from invading the pastor’s personal time with professional matters.

Respect the boundaries of everyone in the congregation. Confidentiality is to be honored. Rumors, ridicule, and gossip are beyond the bounds. Honor each individual’s varying and sometimes fluid boundaries for privacy, touch, family, and other commitments.

### **15. Develop clear job descriptions, schedules, and guidelines.**

Set and be clear about good boundaries in all areas of ministry. Have clear job descriptions, predictable and publicized schedules, and agreed upon expectations throughout the congregation.

Establish job descriptions for the pastor, other professional leaders, and for lay leaders, e.g. council members, committee chairs and members, altar guild, office volunteers, ushers, teachers.

Misunderstandings, confusion, hard feelings, and resentment arise on all sides when assumptions are made, especially about work expectations that are not normally part of one’s role.

Who sets the council agenda? Who types the council agenda? Who reads the lessons on Sunday morning? Who recruits and assigns the readers for Sunday worship? Who supervises and leads the youth group event? Who cleans up the fellowship hall after the youth group event?

Shared expectations about roles and responsibilities and other boundaries in the church help us all to avoid burn-out. Does the congregation expect the pastor to do everything? Does the congregation want the pastor to let go of and share more ministry tasks and responsibility? Who is involved in decision-making and at what level?

Schedules are very important. Regular, dependable office hours, meetings, worship, rehearsals, and youth groups help to foster a climate of accountability, welcome, and openness throughout the congregation.

Some congregations publish a small handbook with information about office hours, the pastor's schedule and availability, telephone coverage and messages, making appointments, scheduling weddings and baptisms, when to call the pastor, what to do in an emergency and who is accountable for what activity or facility.

When is the church office open? When is the telephone covered? When is the pastor working? Does the pastor have regular "office hours"? Can you just drop in? Does the pastor work from home part of the time? When do sermons get written? (Is it scheduled as working time, or is it expected to be done on the pastor's day off?) When is planning done? Do you provide "comp time"? When does the pastor celebrate holidays (like Christmas)?

Well-publicized, regular council and committee schedules provide important information in addition to creating a climate that says, "Please come; if you have something for the agenda, we want to know." Regular meetings of a mutual ministry (or other personnel) committee send a message that the congregation takes seriously its partnership with its professional staff. They also provide opportunity for those who may have serious concerns to bring them forward in a responsible and timely way.

While strict rules about visitation are not helpful, it is good to have publicized guidelines about pastoral counseling and calls. For example, the pastor may publicize an "office hours" schedule that includes daytime and some evening hours. It is best to encourage use of the pastor's office at church for these appointments, and to have other personnel or regular volunteers in the building at those times.

It is also helpful to publicize guidelines about pastoral counseling. You may clarify, for example, that pastors are not trained counselors and that the pastor will provide up to three (or five) sessions of care before making a referral to a trained mental health professional.

Guidelines about confidentiality, especially in the church office, are crucial, and need to be known throughout the congregation. Church office staff are extensions of the pastor's ministry. They, too, have a professional responsibility to keep strict confidences regarding messages and appointments.

All staff and all volunteers, especially those who work with children and youth, need to know of the congregation's unwavering commitment to safety and integrity in all relationships. Resources listed in the appendix provide information especially about preventing child sexual abuse by volunteers in the church.

## **Prevention is possible when expectations are clear and accountability is established.**

Shared expectations free us to get on with the ministry at hand, free from having to reinvent the wheel every week, free from distraction, anger, cynicism, or confusion.

Negotiating, agreeing to, and clarifying expectations in advance helps each party to the relationship accept their appropriate share of responsibility in that relationship. Each person has more leverage, more power, in the relationship and can call others to account, not just about the activity of that moment, but for maintaining the integrity of the boundary agreement overall and the relationship itself.

## **Prevention takes work, but not as much work as healing and recovery after boundary violations!**

This morning, on my drive in to work, traffic was backed up for miles. When we first slammed on our brakes, the car behind me ended up next to me because he had been going too fast and wasn't watching when the brake lights went on. For several minutes, we didn't move at all. Some drivers even turned off the ignition. Radio traffic reports never provided an explanation. Finally, inching along, trying to concentrate on staying awake, on staying in my lane, on staying out of the way of drivers who tried to get ahead just a tiny bit faster by squeezing around one car, edging in front of another, I had plenty of time to wonder about what had happened.

Eight miles down the road, and thirty frustrating minutes later, I finally saw what happened to cause this delay: Front right bumper versus left rear fender. One car clipped the other while changing lanes too fast, moving in to be where another car already was.

However hard it is to be alert and aware, prepared and preventive, it is not nearly so difficult as what happens when there is a violation. In the case of the collision this morning, two drivers would end up spending the better part of a morning dealing with police, tow trucks, car rental and repair services, and it would take a long time before their lives returned to normal. Physical injuries would make it much worse. And all because of reckless and careless inattention, and the temptation to go where you didn't belong.

Even those of us not involved in the actual collision were affected. I was late for a meeting. And so were hundreds of others.

Clergy sexual abuse has serious consequences for those most directly involved. Their lives will not get back to normal for a very long time, if ever. And those in the congregation around them will find their lives and their common ministry seriously disrupted.

Congregations also experience serious consequences of clergy sexual abuse. Attendance falls off, sometimes quite dramatically. Giving decreases, also significantly. The focus is diverted from sharing ministry, outreach and evangelism, social ministry and witness, to an inward focus. Factions and cliques develop. A host of unhealthy institutional behaviors and dynamics set in.

As with individuals, healing is possible. But it will take a long time.

However time-consuming and awkward it may seem to take preventive steps now, it is not nearly so painful as the experience of clergy sexual abuse, nor as difficult as the process of healing afterward!

# **ESTABLISHING A SAFE CONNECTION**

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO TO PREVENT CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE**

1. Education! For everybody—laity, clergy, church leaders, community
2. Clarify expectations: “zero tolerance policy” of sexual contact between pastor and parishioners
3. Prepare a policy and a plan for responding to complaints
4. Skip the “laundry list of don’ts” but establish a climate of openness, trust, awareness, carefulness, and respect
5. Encourage your pastor to take care of personal needs away and apart from the congregation
6. Make sure your pastor is taking appropriate time off
7. Provide adequate vacation time for pastors
8. Provide appropriate time and funds for continuing education for your pastor
9. Provide adequate and fair compensation for pastors
10. Discourage your pastor from being a lone ranger. Encourage accountability, appropriate supervision and collegiality. Be alert to isolation.
11. Clarify expectations of single pastors and make them known widely
12. Encourage your pastor to “get a life!” Promote healthiness and wholeness
13. Honor and respect the pastor’s family commitments and family life
14. Help establish and respect healthy boundaries throughout the congregation
15. Be clear about job descriptions, policies, schedules, and other guidelines for pastors, lay leaders, pastoral relationships, and lay volunteers



# SAFE CONNECTIONS

## UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE CHURCH

### Books and Videos

*Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, by Carolyn Holderread Heggen, Herald Press, 1993, \$9.95 Very helpful, full of practical insights and ideas for congregations who hope to help victims become “survivors who are thriving, turning woundedness and pain into beauty and strength.” Includes chapters on the distinction between forgiveness and restitution, prevention and congregational responses.

*Beyond the News: Sexual Abuse*, by Mennonite Media Productions (800-999-3534), a 21-minute video with study guide for congregational and other group use. Introduction to dynamics and issues, including clergy sexual abuse, to provide helpful context for discussion. Compatible but not required for use with *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* \$19.95 (available for preview or purchase).

*Is Nothing Sacred?*, by Marie M. Fortune, Harper Collins, 1989, \$10.00. 1990 Book of the Year Award from the Academy of Parish Clergy, this book is groundbreaking in its exploration of the problem of clergy sexual abuse. The story of one congregation’s experience with an abusing pastor, and careful analysis of the issues. Fortune discusses the effect of clergy sexual abuse on individual victims, the entire congregation, and the denomination responsible for care of the congregation and of clergy on its roster.

*Not In-My Church*, by the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, (206-634-1903), or 936 N. 34th Street, #200, Seattle, WA 98103. 45-minute docudrama. The story of one church faced with betrayal of trust by its pastor. Excellent intro to the topic for all audiences. \$149 purchase, \$60 rental (one week), free one month preview. Both rental and preview must be secured with credit card and be reserved one month in advance. Also available: comprehensive training curriculum, includes 50-minute training video, “Once You Cross the Line.” \$375 purchase, preview arrangements as above. The Center has other excellent resources about preventing child sexual abuse and domestic violence and abuse. Visit their online store at [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org)

*Sex in the Forbidden Zone*, by Peter Rutter, Ballantine Books (Fawcett Crest), 1989, \$5.99. Written from the perspective of a professional therapist, about the dangers to everyone involved when professional caregivers, including clergy, become sexually involved with clients/parishioners. Rich exploration of the factors leading to abusive sexual involvements and strategies to help prevent them.

*At Personal Risk Boundary: Violations in Professional-Client Relationships*, by Marilyn R. Peterson, W.W. Norton, 1992, \$22.95 (cloth). An excellent, probing examination of the psychological and moral dynamics involved in professional sexual misconduct. Worth the price! Must-reading for clergy and other professionals who struggle to understand the landscape of their relationship with others, especially as regards the power of their role. Wise, hopeful, and forward-looking insights.

*The Cry of Tamar. Violence Against Women and the Church's Response*, Pamela Cooper-White, Fortress Press, 1995. This book begins with the biblical story of the rape of Tamar, and proceeds to look with great care and insight at the terrible range of violence that is committed against women today. A specific chapter on clergy sexual abuse is rich with wisdom about why it happens, why it is abuse, why it is so harmful, why some women may be more vulnerable than others to become victims, why some pastors may be more at risk to commit this offense, and how we can work to prevent incidence of this problem. It is worth noting that this author takes a strong view, and explains it clearly, against single pastors dating members of the parish. Her words are well worth consideration.

*Sex in the Parish*, by Karen Lebacqz and Ronald Barton, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991, \$14.95. A "realistic appraisal of the complex relationships between pastor and parishioners." Ethical analysis, detailed suggestions regarding policies and plans. Lays out an ethical framework for single pastors seeking to conduct a dating relationship with a parishioner. Provides special attention to women clergy, and gay and lesbian clergy relationships. Examines consequences of abuse while affirming sexuality as a gift.

*Healers—Harmed and Harmful*, Conrad W. Weiser, Fortress Press, 1994. \$14.00. This is, as the author states clearly, not a book about clergy sexual abuse. And it is not a simple, self-help, fix-it-up book. After working for years as a psychologist and consultant with clergy and congregations, the author became convinced that something deeper than lack of skill or commitment was preventing some pastors from effective ministry. This book sets out the psychodynamic issues at work in the lives of some clergy, wreaking havoc in their personal affairs and in their ministry. It is useful for those concerned about clergy sexual abuse who are open to or already share his premise that the harmful and inappropriate actions of the adult pastor are the product of unrecovered damage from childhood.

*Ethics in Ministry A Guide for the Professional*, Walter E. Wiest and Elwyn A. Smith, Fortress Press, 1990, \$15.00. Case studies and analysis are woven together to present a thoughtful presentation about ethics for clergy. It is not a book about clergy sexual abuse, although this ethical breach is discussed along with others. This study presents careful consideration of the basic issues involved in a range of ethical concerns, from lying and telling the truth to finances to dating to ego-gratification. It is useful, probing the sexual boundary and the temptations to abuse power. Helpful for those seeking to prevent clergy sexual abuse, and to help others understand it.

Available for order from Augsburg Fortress Publishers (800-328-4648):
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*If You Have Been Sexually Abused or Harassed: A Guide to Getting Effective Help in the ELCA* #69-5115

*Vision and Expectations for Ordained Ministers in the ELCA* #69-9440

*An ELCA Strategy for Responding to Sexual Abuse in the Church* #69-3584

*Mutual Ministry Committee: A Vision for Building Up the Body of Christ* #69-6735

Other resources and information available from the Rev. Jan Erickson-Pearson (800-638-3522, ext. 2455) ELCA Sexual Abuse Prevention Strategy, Division for Ministry of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631

Books on related topics such as clergy sexual abuse, ethics, and pastoral role: (800-328-4648)

*Pastorpower* by Martha Stortz

*Breach of Trust, Sexual Exploitation by Health Care Professionals and Clergy* edited by John C. Gonsiorek

*Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman

*The Abuse of Power* by James Poling

*Incest in the Organizational Family* by William White

*Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* by Marie Fortune

*Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us* by Marie Fortune

*The Depleted Self* by Donald Capps

*Generation to Generation* by Edwin Friedman

*Sexual Assault and Abuse: A Handbook for Clergy and Religious Professionals* edited by Mary Pellauer and Jane Boyajian (Out of print but available for loan from most synod offices and ELCA seminary libraries)

Alban Institute materials related to clergy sexual abuse. Alban Institute, 4125 Nebraska Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C., 20016 (800-457-2674)
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*Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct* Edited by Nancy Myer Hopkins and Mark Lasser, in cooperation with the Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute, Collegetown, MN; a book with numerous contributors, comprehensive analysis and proposals for action. \$19.95

*The Congregation Is Also A Victim: Sexual Abuse and Violation of Pastoral Trust* by Nancy Myer Hopkins

*Healing the Congregation: A Resource* by Denise D. Tracy (Brand new and unreviewed)

*Clergy Sexual Misconduct. A Systems Perspective* by Nancy Myer Hopkins

*Considerations for Conducting an Investigation of Alleged Clergy Sexual Misconduct* by Anne Underwood

*An Attorney Looks at the Secular Foundation for Clergy Sexual Misconduct Policies* by Anne Underwood

*Sexual Paradox: Creative Tensions in Our Lives and in Our Congregations* by Celia Allison Hahn

*Being Clergy/Staying Human* by Dorothy McRae-McMahon

*Caring for the Caregiver: Growth Models for Professional Leaders and Congregations* by Gary Harbaugh

*Who Ministers to Ministers?* by Barbara Gilbert

*The Male/Female Church Staff: Celebrating the Gifts, Confronting the Challenges* by Celia Allison Hahn and Anne Marie Nuechterlein

Training materials and curriculum available for use with clergy and laity:

*Not in My Church* 45-minute docudrama telling the story of one congregation faced with allegations of clergy sexual abuse. Accusations are brought against the beloved pastor by a former intern. We see flashbacks to her conversations with the accused, and his continuing pattern of abuse with current members of the congregation. What makes these relationships clergy sexual abuse? We learn along with the congregational committee convened to hear the initial complaint and with the regional church official responsible for discipline of pastors and care of congregations. An excellent introduction for all adults. May be used with senior high school students. One study guide is included with each video. *Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence*, \$149 purchase, \$60 rental, Free preview (with credit card guarantee). One month advance reservation required for rental and preview tapes. 936 N. 34th Street, #200, Seattle, WA 98103. (206-634-1903)

*Clergy Misconduct: Sexual Abuse in the Ministerial Relationship* Comprehensive curriculum designed to prepare a person to lead workshops in a variety of settings on the range of issues related to clergy sexual abuse. Intended for participants in a trainers' workshop led by staff of the Faith Trust Institute, the curriculum is sold separately. Materials cost does not include trainers' workshop tuition fee; call the Institute for schedule of trainers' workshops. Includes excellent teaching video, divided up into several segments with extensive guide for discussion. Trainers' manual, one participant manual, and two videotapes ("Not in My Church" and "Once You Cross the Line"). Faith Trust Institute Seattle. \$375. Free preview (see above).

*Sexual Ethics in Ministry* Eleven vignettes dramatize the dilemmas faced by clergy related to sexual ethics. Leaders'/discussion guide included. Extensive materials provide good introduction for a range of groups, including clergy, laity, denominational leaders and seminary faculty and students. Training for leaders may be available; contact the office below for details. University of Wisconsin at Madison, Health and Human Issues, Sexual Ethics in Ministry Project, Lowell Hall, Room, 324, 610 Langdon Street, Madison WI 53703. (800-442-4617 or 608-264-2195). \$249.

*Choosing the Light: Victims of Clergy Sexual Misconduct Share Their Stories* Study guide and video produced by the Greater Milwaukee Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Excellent introduction for congregational use. Greater Milwaukee Synod, 1212 S. Layton Boulevard, Milwaukee, WI 53215 (414-671-1212)

For the names and other information about individuals who are prepared to lead a training in your congregation, synod, region or other group, please contact the Rev. Jan Erickson-Pearson, ELCA Sexual Abuse Prevention Strategy, Division for Ministry of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631 (800-638-3522, ext. 2455)

Safe Connections for children/Resources for prevention of child sexual abuse:

*Scriptographic* booklets about child sexual abuse available from Channing Bede, Co. Simple illustrations and written text provide a good tool to use with and give to children. They have several different booklets related to this topic. Call 800-628-7733 for more information. Phones answered 8:00 a.m. - 8:00p.m. EST.

*Hear Their Cries: Religious Responses to Child Abuse* This 48-minute documentary about the role of pastors and lay leaders in preventing child abuse includes definitions of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, signs of how to recognize possible abuse, stories of adult survivors, examples of how to respond to a victim's disclosure of abuse, discussion of theological issues,

including forgiveness, and suggestions for how to work with secular agencies. Includes study guide and 25 audience brochures. Won several awards for excellence in communication and teaching. Excellent introduction and background for all adult audiences. May serve as background for the next step (See order information below.)

*Bless Our Children: Preventing Sexual Abuse* 40-minute story of one congregation's ministry to include sexual abuse prevention in religious education for children. Practical methods and suggestions, actual classroom examples, and compelling explanation of why this belongs in religious education. As with previous video, this addresses the potential of preventing abuse in a range of settings, including the church. Intended for use with *Hear Their Cries*. Includes study guide and 25 audience brochures. Excellent for use with all adult audiences. Faith Trust Institute, 936 N. 34th Street, #200, Seattle, WA 98103. (206-634-1903) \$185 for both videos, \$60 package rental, free preview. (Credit card guarantee and one month advance reservation required for rental and preview use.) *Hear Their Cries* only: \$129 purchase. \$40 rental. *Bless Our Children* only: \$99 purchase. \$40 rental. Free preview. (Credit card guarantee and one month advance reservation required for rental and preview use.)

Also available from the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence:

*Sexual Abuse Prevention: A Study for Teenagers* by Marie M. Fortune. Curriculum for church youth groups or teen classes. Five sessions, each 90 minutes. Information ranging from facts and myths of sexual assault to coping with media messages about women, men, and relationships. Session topics include "Rape is Violence, Not Sex," "The Good, the Bad, the Confusing," and "All in the Family." \$6.95. Faith Trust Institute, 936 N. 34th Street, #200, Seattle, WA 98103. (206-634-1903)

*Preventing Child Sexual Abuse* by Kathryn Goering Reid with Marie M. Fortune. Curriculum for children ages 9-12 for use in religious context. 13 sessions could work as Sunday school curriculum or in a variety of other settings. \$9.95.

*Preventing Child Sexual Abuse* by Kathryn Goering Reid. 10 sessions for use with children 5-8 years old, could work in Sunday school curriculum or other religious education settings. \$11.95

Resource materials for congregational policies concerning sexual misconduct committed by non-rostered employees and volunteers in the church:

*Child Abuse Prevention Primer for Your Organization* Comprehensive resource materials applicable directly to congregational and other non-profit settings. Available from Non-Profit Risk Management Center, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, #900, Washington, D.C. 20036-5504. \$12.00. New in 1995. 88 pages.

*Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse in Your Church.* This kit is produced by Christian Ministry Resources and includes:

**Video:** A two-part video communicating the menace child sexual abuse poses and the need for your church to take action. Part One uses testimonials of victims, church leaders and experts to alert churches to the problem. Part Two illustrates procedures that can be used to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse. Helpful for educating leaders, church workers, volunteers, and members.



**Guide Book:** A 90-page guide offers a blueprint for a prevention plan, with detailed guidance on enlisting the support of key church leaders, formulating policies and procedures, hiring and training workers (paid and volunteer), and implementing your plans in the local congregation. The book is filled with illustrations and examples and includes sample screening forms.

**Training Manual:** Provides insights and guidance on how to use the entire resource kit for an effective education program for the entire congregation.

**Audio Cassette:** For use by program participants on all levels, in sessions or otherwise; plays a strategic role in helping church leaders grasp the seriousness of the risk and provides strong incentive to launch a prevention effort. Includes an interview with an attorney who specializes in insuring churches.

Available from Christian Ministry Resources, P.O. Box 2301, Matthews, NC 28106. \$49.95.

For congregations insured with Church Mutual Insurance Company, order Church Mutual Resource Kit, P.O. Box 357, Merrill, WI 55452. \$15.00.

*Managing Risks: First Steps in Identifying Congregational Liability* By Richard B. Couser. 48-page workbook/checklist to assist congregational leaders in reviewing the legal liabilities of the congregation in a number of areas, including employment practices, volunteer selection and supervision. Out of print but may be found in synod resource centers or public libraries. (This soft-cover guide follows the same outline as the book, in hard cover, published as *Ministry and the American Legal System*, by Richard B. Couser, Augsburg Fortress 800-328-4648; \$7.95 Order code #23-2303

*Risky Business: Church Hiring and Volunteer Selection: A Legal and Policy Guide* by Lynn Buzzard and Susan Edwards. 275 pages includes overview of legal considerations, a recommended process for hiring staff, extended discussion of issues arising from staff or volunteer responsibility for the care of children, brief outline of pertinent federal statutes and an extended (70 page) appendix containing sample forms, checklists, and bylaw provisions. Available from Church-State Resource Center, Campbell University of Law, P.O. Box 158, Buies Creek, NC 27506. (910-893-1200). \$19.50.

*Guidelines for Charities for Reduction of Volunteer Liability.* 24-page guide dealing with liability issues connected with volunteer activity. Written from the perspective of Illinois law, the identification and analysis of issues is applicable in other states. Available from DePaul University College of Law, Center for Church/State Studies, 25 E. Jackson Blvd., Chicago, IL 60604-2287. (312-362-6908).

Examples of congregational policies from ELCA congregations available for your review, from the ELCA Sexual Abuse Prevention Strategy, (800-638-3522, ext. 2455.) ELCA Vocation and Education Program Unit, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631.