

Be Aware—spotting sexual harassment

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An ethics professor of a seminary is accused of sexual assault of his female students. At every level of church hierarchy, the perpetrator is protected and the woman is sexually assaulted again. If no one believed her the first time, so the reasoning goes, she is fair game for further assault by anyone within the church system—she has been labeled as someone who makes up these stories for attention.

A woman services her priest who is not allowed to marry. The sympathy toward the cleric and the loneliness of the parishioner were manipulated against her as part of the seduction. Her confusion, conscience, and emotional pain had sent her to the local centre for targets of sexual abuse.

We need to think ahead to be prepared with speedy and effective response times to an inappropriate sexual environment. Pretending it does not happen will not protect you or the people you know. The let's pretend game only serves to make the offender feel untouchable. But, what if we are over-reacting?

Any spiritual leader from any community is responsible to not abuse one's power over his or her group of people. Sex as a tool is but one manner in which this may occur. It cannot be assumed by the person in office that he or she will not cross the line. Aware diligence will go a long way. The temptation to misuse one's power is very great, particularly if one has not been properly taught how to wield that power. Our infrastructures need to become more accountable, our timelines and what we do in them more measurable for task completion or everything can become "fair game".

Have you or any member of your family ever been subjected to sexual harassment? Anyone anywhere is vulnerable to experience harassment, male or female, young or old. It can happen at home, school, work, on the street, or within the Spiritual community.

Sexual harassment, a precursor to sexual assault, is a sin of opportunity often disguising itself as seduction. Federal law states that sexual assault is restricted to the actual touching of sexual parts of your body without consent. Perpetrators use lewdness, indecent actions, to test how far they can go.

Lewdness is in bad taste but it is not a criminal act. Sexual jokes and innuendo are difficult to negotiate when society tolerates this activity. Such actions prepare a congregation and its leadership to feel a conditioned helplessness, so when each report of a leader's sexualized behavior the members have been conditioned to see the action as "normal." Blind loyalty develops, short-circuiting the internal conflict of loyalty towards the authority figure seen to represent God and disapproval for this same representative's actions. Ethical functioning slides into the back seat and ceases to be the driving force of the group.

An embrace is a full bodied clasp with the arms of another person, a difficult position for the recipient to tactfully withdraw from. What we may assume to be a hug of greeting or support may actually become a lewd embrace. How does one set limits? What might the limits be? Is an embrace from a person in authority ever appropriate, considering the danger of crossing another's personal boundary and comfort zone?

Our bodies are created to respond to physical contact. An infant cannot live and thrive without being touched and held. We respond to the gestures of loved ones. Physical intimacy with a loved one is welcome and anticipated. We are physically "wired" to respond positively. When an acquaintance or person of authority chooses to behave in the same intimate manner towards us, our bodies automatically respond to the stimulus of intimate embrace and sexual touch.

It is difficult to turn a quick about-face when the stimulus of words and gestures normally filled with love and affection are suddenly fouled with evil intent or misplaced attention. We respond to the physical stimulus which normally expresses love. Yet our minds are scrambling to escape an uncomfortable situation of presumption by the perpetrator, compounded by our affection for the person or the person's office, neither being an excuse to be offended against.

We need to be aware when appropriate boundaries are crossed, and to be prepared with speedy and effective responses to an inappropriate sexual environment. Pretending that it does not happen to good people is no protection. Sexual harassment and abuse are a syndrome (an identifiable set of behavioral characteristics which we can identify as sexual harassment). Unfortunately we may not realize this about the person until after the fact.

If you are a victim of sexual harassment, it is important to be clear to yourself and to your loved ones that it is not your fault no matter what you think you should have done differently. You just happened to be available. That could be in the choir loft, in the Sunday School, in the supply room, the minister's office—make no mistake about this: every other faith has the same troubles. The statistical percentage of sexually abusive clergy is on par with the rest of society. They violate expectations, break public trust, and distort their spiritual leadership.

Some clergy think being lewd and sexually active is a means of giving pastoral care, that of giving you what you "need". Others compartmentalize their life and ministry and think that it is okay to be sexually active with the people under their spiritual care if they take their clerical collar off first. Others think it is permissible so long as the target isn't a member of their own congregation. I pointed out in **UnHoly Orders** that there was a craze among psychologists a few decades ago to provide sexual contact as "therapy".

Back in the 1980s the percentage of clergy sexual offenders who actively looked for opportunities to offend was 10%. Another 15% of clergy sexually offended if the opportunity presented itself. Society is much worse now than it was in the 1980s. Social media has changed the extent one can get away with. The lines are easier to blur and to take advantage.

A sexual harasser escalates the offending activity if there is reinforcement of any kind. Denial by the management or ruling elders in a church is a powerful reinforcement which escalates the abusive behavior. The offender becomes empowered and feels that the law and the church can't touch him.

When the minister or other church leader makes lewd sexual jokes in front of people, the behavior needs to be challenged immediately. Declare it unacceptable for everyone who heard the offending remarks to hear. Silent embarrassment encourages more offending behavior of the same kind as the offender assumes those who are silent are willing recipients of such talk and are of the same lewd mind.

The will and ability to use such sexualized language indicates a leaning toward interpreting the neutral behavior of others (asking for prayer) as only an excuse to get alone with the cleric because the person is sexually attracted to the minister. The community feels a

conditioned helplessness so that with each report about the leader's sexualized behavior the church people learn to see the behavior as "just his way." Misplaced loyalty develops towards the "representative of God" via denial of the problem instead of heeding the fear of God if the situation is allowed to continue and escalate into more serious offences.

- Are you in an escalating and potentially sexually explosive situation?
- Does the minister (usually a "he") ignore your space boundaries by being physically too close or by placing his hand on your thigh, etc?
- Does he ignore your wishes, make light of your shock when he has been either verbally or physically inappropriate?
- Attempt to make you feel guilty or accuse you of being "uptight"?
- Become hostile and/or increasingly more aggressive when you say "no"?
- Does he act particularly friendly and try to separate you from your friends?
- Insist on being alone with you? Ask personal questions and is interested in knowing more about you than you want to tell him?
- Does he have an unusually personalized approach to individuals?
- Does he subscribe excessively to traditional male and female stereotypes?
- Has it become commonplace that after every private conversation in the minister's office it ends up in a sexual embrace?
- Is the minister getting his "fix"?
- Does he claim you are the only one in the church he can trust? This "connection" is an illusion to gain control.
- Are people seen as either "for" or "against" the sexual/romance/relationship addict?

In the spiritual community the perpetrator sets up a dualistic situation in which the co-addict (co-dependent) rulers of the community feel they have to take sides. This is the tremendous power that the addict has, deliberately involving other people in his addictive behavior. In taking sides, the rulers are also in a non-recovery addictive process.

Congregations are polarized and accusations are made about “those people” who are against the addict. This self-fulfilling tactic has split churches. Be assured you are not over reacting. But the people around him may be conditioned to accept his behaviors as just a part of his “warm” personality and assume he is just a “touching” person.

From a sexual healing point of view the phenomenon is the difficulty in connecting with someone else over time on many levels. All the energy normally spread out to these many levels are honed in on the sexual manipulation game.ⁱ Some exhibit a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality. He may appear to be gentlemanly and charming but under stress or when he finds a vulnerable victim his personality changes.ⁱⁱ

Potential victims are tested. Pay attention to remarks and comments made to you which may reveal true feelings. Some may exhibit that Jekyll-and-Hyde personality. A friend of mine was a perpetual victim of an Anglican Priest’s sexual violations whenever he drank, which was fairly often: he was her dad. Sober, he was seen as a great cleric. This messed with her head pretty good.

If the potential victim does not react when obviously uncomfortable to a hand put on the thigh, the potential rapist will identify her as easy prey. Many harassers are repeat offenders and are skilled at identifying weaknesses in potential victims.

Sexual harassment occurs in a sexualized environment, confronting and interpreting your thoughts for you, your actions and motives in a sexual way, sexualized talk, sexual innuendoes, off-color jokes, and acting out sexually. The goals are control and manipulation. It isn’t personal. It is just the perfecting and sharpening of an addictive skill set: it increasingly becomes a habitual game; an unhealthy cycle of relating; a compulsive personality pattern.

Denial, a type of lying or misleading oneself and others, inoculates him and his victims from their feelings, thoughts and needs. From the seed of denial grows the illusion of control. If a person convinces himself it is not happening, then the situation is not addressed.

Verbal threats are typical from someone who doesn’t want to be reported. Who is not going to believe the leader in question who has worked so hard to be a buddy with the men? People, one way or another, have come to feel indebted to him. A major social spiritual fabric of one’s life is destroyed if the discrediting statements about you

by the offender and by his supporters are believed by the church family.

It is difficult for the target person not to be in shock when a clergy person manipulates and controls with sexual overtures. A real sense of betrayal sets in when the church family does not support the individual targeted. It is difficult, by extension, to not feel betrayed by God. The spiritual community which is meant to be spiritually nurturing has caused a spiritual crisis.

Stop the cycle of denial with education so we can repent before God and become a healing church even as Jesus Christ has sent us the Holy Spirit to heal. This article is but a first step to understanding and to being educated out of our denial position.

Whether in the workplace, at home, with family or friends, or in one's spiritual community a major social fabric of one's life is destroyed, if the discrediting statements are believed.

Whether in the work place or in church, a major social fabric of your life is destroyed if the discrediting statements about you are believed.

Intercede in prayer daily for our church leaders and for our sexually addictive society. Declare the Divine's purposes and your authority as the power of Jesus Christ's life and personal sacrifice leads us to overcome the enemy of life and light. Realize that, as offensive this topic is to you, it is a greater stench to the Holy Spirit. As we become a praying church this evil cannot stand:

Divine Creative, let your fingers that put the galaxies in place reach deep inside the ailing body of Your Church and rearrange its parts. Speak the Word that made heaven and earth in order that your church body may be recreated. Make the temple of this body whole and holy, that your will may be done perfectly through it. We are but the fuse for the power of the Almighty God to pour through us.

Our heavenly Parent, in Jesus' name, we pray a protective hedge round about our clergy and community leaders. Establish your will and plan for our spiritual leaders and family, granting wisdom in the spaces in areas formal training missed. Uphold their ministry, the organizational leadership, their spouses, children, parents, siblings,

and entire spiritual community staff and their families. We pray that the adversary's purposes be destroyed. Amen.

Note: Some may find the attribute of a spiritual adversary a personification of certain attitudes. This is fine. Pray against the attitudes.

ⁱ Janet Booker, **UnHoly Orders: Abuse of Power That Tempts Us All**; The Identification and Recovery Process from Sexual Harassment and Assault by Clergy and Other Religious Leaders. FreedomLine Enterprises, 25 Tasker Street, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, L2R 3Z9, 1996, xxi-xxii. Dr. Paul Pearsall, PhD., **Sexual Healing, Using the Power of an Intimate, Loving Relationship to Heal Your Body and Soul**, Crown Publishers Inc., New York, N.Y., 1994, 177.

ⁱⁱ Booker, Ibid, 11. Carol Pritchard, **Avoiding Rape On and Off Campus**, State College Publishing Company, N.J., 1988, 18-20.