

Study finds clergy sexual misconduct widespread: Several themes emerge

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In any given congregation with 400 adult members, seven women on average have been victims of clergy sexual misconduct since they turned 18, a new national study reveals.

“We knew anecdotally that clergy sexual misconduct with adults is a huge problem, but we were surprised it is so prevalent across all denominations, all religions, all faith groups, all across the country,” said lead researcher Diana Garland, dean of the Baylor University School of Social Work. “Clergy sexual misconduct is no respecter of denominations.”

The study revealed that more than 3 percent of adult women who had attended a church in the past month reported that a religious leader had made sexual advances to them. Research found that 92 percent of those sexual advances were made in secret, and 67 percent of the offenders were married to someone else.

“This is not simply [about having] an affair. It is an abuse of power,” Garland said. The findings were drawn from questions included in the 2008 General Social Survey, a random sampling of 3,559 American adults conducted by the Chicago-based National Opinion Research Center.

In addition, research included phone interviews with more than 80 people. They included 46 people who had been victims of clergy sexual misconduct as adults, representing 17 Christian denominations and branches of Judaism.

The phone interviewees also included 15 secondary victims of clergy sexual abuse—spouses, friends and church staff members not involved in the victimization—and 21 experts, such as caregivers for survivors.

“When it was happening to me, I felt confused and isolated,” said Carolyn Waterstradt, a survivor of sexual misconduct who took part in the research. “Now I know that many others have struggled with this, and that there is hope for putting

systems in place to help prevent it from happening.”

The Baylor team has worked to draft model legislation to make the offenses illegal in the same way that relationships with patients and clients are illegal for other helping professionals, such as doctors and lawyers. At present only Texas and Minnesota have statutes to guard against clergy sexual misconduct.

“This is the largest scientific study into clergy sexual misconduct with adults,” Garland said. “We hope these findings will prompt congregations to consider adopting policies and procedures designed to protect their members from leaders who abuse their power.”

Most offenders identified by interview subjects were male, but two were female. Offenses included both heterosexual and homosexual misbehavior. While incidents of clergy sexual misconduct occurred in a wide variety of congregations, some themes emerged, Garland noted:

- Warning signs ignored. In some instances, congregations “see it happening and don’t know how to name it,” she said. Congregations lack the ability to categorize what they witness.
- A culture of niceness. Particularly in the context of religious communities, people are careful not to hurt anyone’s feelings and are expected to give others the benefit of the doubt and to overlook incidents that might cause embarrassment.
- Ease of private communication. In the past, family members knew when letters arrived or phone messages were left for other family members. With e-mail and cell phones, clergy can conduct intimate conversations with congregants without others’ knowledge.
- Lack of oversight. Religious leaders seldom have to report to anyone for their time and may move freely within a community without being suspected of inappropriate activity.
- Multiple roles. Beyond their role in providing spiritual direction in times of crisis, some religious leaders enter into long-term counseling relationships that can create vulnerability and dependency.
- Trust in the sanctuary. “We call it a sanctuary because it’s supposed to be a safe place. We trust leaders to tell us the truth,” Garland noted. But some clergy abuse

that trust, using their religious authority to prey upon members of their congregations.

“Because many people are familiar with some of the high-profile cases of sexual misconduct, most people assume that it is just a matter of a few charismatic leaders preying on vulnerable followers,” Garland said.

The research was supported by a Southern Baptist commission and the Ford Foundation, among other organizations. The findings will be published later this year in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

“Now that we have a better understanding of the problem, we can start looking at prevention strategies,” Garland said.

The Baylor School of Social Work has produced resources, including a sample code of ethics for congregations and ministers to consider adopting, and a set of strategies for preventing clergy sexual misconduct, which are posted online. -Ken Camp, *Associated Baptist Press*