

Addictive behavior: Pastors and pornography

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [September 4, 2007](#) issue

According to many Christian groups, pornography is a disturbing and increasing problem. A Promise Keepers survey found that 53 percent of its members consume pornography. A 2000 *Christianity Today* survey found that 37 percent of pastors said pornography is a “current struggle” of theirs. Fifty-seven percent called pornography the most sexually damaging issue for their congregations. A Barna Research Group study released in February 2007 said that 35 percent of men and 17 percent of women reported having used pornography in the past month.

The pornography industry in the United States is indeed large. *Adult Video News*, an industry publication, estimates the industry’s 2006 revenues at \$13.3 billion. The U.S. is the world’s largest producer and consumer of pornographic material. Porn Web sites draw 72 million visitors every month; more than 13,000 pornographic video titles are produced yearly.

Reliable data on porn are hard to come by, however, given the private and often secretive nature of porn use. Statistics frequently come from sources that have their own reasons to exaggerate—either the pornography industry itself, which wants to show how popular its products are, or groups trying to combat pornography that are eager to demonstrate how pervasive it is.

One of the most reliable sources on sexual behavior is the General Social Survey (GSS), a wide random sample of American opinion and behavior. In 2002 the GSS found that 14 percent of respondents had visited a pornographic Web site in the past 30 days (25 percent of men and 4 percent of women).

Whatever the exact numbers, pornography clearly touches the lives of a significant number of people, including people in the pews and people in ministry. And for some of these people, pornography is a life-destroying obsession.

Sexual addiction, for which pornography is frequently a starting place, is a phenomenon that is increasingly being explored by therapists. David Delmonico, professor of counseling education at Duquesne University and author of *In the Shadows of the Net*, says that the dynamics of sexual addiction are becoming clearer. "As we become more sophisticated in our brain research," Delmonico says, "we are coming to understand that people don't get addicted to a drug; they get addicted to a process. Heroin may be the drug of choice for some, and sex may be the drug of choice for others. In any case, addiction perpetuates itself through a cycle, and until the underlying causes are addressed, the addiction will just continue or switch from one thing to another."

Psychologists say that the markers for addiction are unmanageability (a person desires to stop a certain behavior but cannot), increasing tolerance and escalation (searching out ever-more "hard core" materials or moving from pornography to sexual encounters, for example) and management of mood through the addictive activity. Sex addicts begin to use various sexual activities to alleviate stress and to relieve boredom or pain.

Because of its accessibility, Internet pornography can easily be what therapist Mark Laaser calls a portal to addiction. Even without the lure of the Internet, Laaser himself experienced an escalation in his attachment to porn. While a student in seminary and then in a program for pastoral counseling, Laaser was a compulsive user of pornographic material. Gradually his addiction to these materials progressed to encounters with prostitutes and to sexual relationships with several women that he was counseling. In 1986 the women sued him and he had to leave the ministry.

Laaser has since devoted himself to research on and treatment of sexual addiction, and he has worked particularly with clergy. He is motivated, he says, by the question, "Could anyone anywhere have seen my problem and helped to prevent me from doing what I did?"

Laaser, director of the Institute for Healthy Sexuality of the American Association of Christian Counselors, executive director of Faithful and True Ministries and author of *Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction* (Zondervan), thinks that pornography addictions are becoming more widespread and that the profile of addicts is changing. When he first began to work in the area of sexual addiction, nearly all his clients had a history of trauma; for them, sexual addiction was a way of coping with or masking severe emotional pain. Today that is seldom the case: people who have

problems with porn look more like the general population.

What makes a person vulnerable to pornography? Addiction is prevalent, Laaser says, among people who have high-demand but low-structure jobs and who spend a great deal of time at their computers, initially for work-related reasons, but also for social connection and entertainment. He points to three elements that foster sexual addiction: loneliness, anger and boredom.

Clergy, Laaser notes, often fit this profile: their jobs make high demands, they work in large part independently and they often struggle with loneliness, anger and boredom. Pastors are often isolated and work in contexts where they have few if any peers. Friendships, too, may be rare for pastors. While they are caregivers themselves, pastors may not have care extended to them.

“The Internet is good for creating a large number of superficial and instantaneous connections,” Laaser observes. “But this is connection without vulnerability, and thus it does little to mollify loneliness.”

The relationship of anger to porn use is more complicated. Frequently, Laaser says, anger grows out of self-justification. The addict blames someone else—a spouse, a parent, a congregation member, an advertisement—for creating the need to turn to pornography. In addition, a sex addict may feel that life is out of control—that God, family and friends have abandoned her, that life has not measured up to its promises. Anger feeds on the addict’s sense of isolation and imprisonment.

Laaser says that he sees many clergy with unacknowledged and deeply buried anger. “If a person has sincerely prayed and asked God to take away the problem and God has not answered those prayers, that can take a person down the road to anger with God.”

Many sexually addicted clergy were “good kids” who waited until marriage to have sex and who believed that marriage and the ready availability of a sexual partner were going to solve their sexual problems. When this fails to occur, anger is a frequent result. Addicts may feel that their spouse is not the person he or she was supposed to be—not sexually available or vulnerable enough.

An additional source of anger may be the demanding, low-paying job. According to Laaser, sexually addicted clergy frequently believe that God should be rewarding them for their hard work and sacrifices. Their struggles related to career, marriage

and vocation can foster a sense that they are not getting what they deserve.

The challenge of boredom is tied to cultural changes. In a fast-paced society that provides an overdose of external stimulation, we turn to media for information, for connection and, perhaps especially, for entertainment. When media fail to entertain us, our tendency is not to reject them but to keep looking. Maybe the next episode or the next log-in will fulfill our expectations for pleasure. Pornography has elements of both stimulation and distraction. Pornography addicts are often, Laaser says, “adrenalin junkies.” For pastors using porn, who know that their careers are at risk, the danger can add to the adrenalin rush.

“One of the keys to understanding sexual addiction,” Laaser notes, “is to know that addicts sexualize love and nurture.” Addicts seek relief from pain and try to get their needs met by substances and activities that promise much, but deliver little.

In a study they conducted in 2002, Delmonico and Laaser found that sexually addicted clergy were far more likely than the general population to be addicted also to work. Work had become not only a calling but an escape from other life problems.

In taking the role of spiritual leader and adviser, some clergy are seeking relief from lifelong feelings of shame and inadequacy. Laaser says that sometimes pastoral ministry is a “shame-reduction strategy.” In using Internet pornography, pastors may be seeking various forms of control, self-justification or entitlement.

Therapist Richard Frazier explains that users of pornography find ways to project their feelings of shame onto pornographic images and then justify the degradation of others by blaming the people in the images rather than themselves.

“Ironically,” says Mark Davies, pastoral counselor and professor of Family Ministries at Carey Theological College in Vancouver, “Christians can be set up for a higher risk of sexual addiction than non-Christians because of the role that shame plays in feeding the addiction.”

Some churches have deployed aggressive monitoring software in an effort to prevent the improper use of the Internet on their church computers. Such software provides a certain amount of accountability, but does not address the issue comprehensively. Delmonico, Laaser and Davies agree that pornography addiction needs to be understood and addressed in a way that considers social, emotional, physical and spiritual factors. Christians often treat pornography use as primarily a

moral issue, Davies says, and identify it with pastoral “failing” without realizing that shame is more fuel for addiction. Churches often fail to temper moral certainty with compassion. Creating an atmosphere of shame and silence around sexual addiction perpetuates the environment in which it thrives.

Laaser believes that churches and denominations can improve their screening processes for potential clergy and pay close attention to early warning signs of a burgeoning sexual addiction. Two key warning signs are workaholism and the appearance of always being above and beyond the crowd—the very traits that are part of our cultural model for the pastor as “great leader.” A person who cannot make himself or herself vulnerable in groups is most at risk for sexual addiction. Laaser proposes intensive clergy mentoring that can cultivate spiritual and emotional development because, he says, despite their role of authority, clergy with a potential for sexual addiction are also often spiritually immature.

Laaser also emphasizes the importance of basic nutrition, exercise and rest in both prevention and healing of sexual addiction. Those who work with addicts know that “acting out” is a symptom of a larger question of physical, mental and spiritual health.

Davies says that he encounters many potential clients who are simply not ready for the hard work of healing. They are looking for a quick fix, eager to be rid of the behavior that is causing them distress, but not ready for truly rearranging their lives. A breakthrough comes when a sexually addicted person gets a view of himself or herself beyond the addiction, a glimpse of the person he or she might become. Laaser believes that sexually addicted clergy can return to ministry once they have faced the myriad issues that led to addiction. A confrontation with addiction can lead people to be more forgiving, more humble and more open.