

Clergy, too, battle porn addiction -- often alone

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(RNS) For years, the Rev. Bernie Anderson carried a shameful secret -- one he feared would destroy his marriage, his career, his standing in the community, even his spiritual identity.

He was addicted to pornography.

Like many others facing a similar struggle, the pastor, now at Wasatch Hills Seventh-day Adventist Church in Salt Lake City, wrestled with his problem alone, praying it would somehow go away.

It didn't. Never does, experts say.

The human costs of pornography have grown exponentially since the days of tattered Playboys tucked away in junior high locker rooms. In this digital age, porn peddlers belong to a multibillion-dollar industry, spreading sexual images for adults and adolescents to download onto their phones or to watch on big-screen TVs.

Smut finds viewers in every faith, ethnicity, age, gender, profession and economic status.

According to a Christianity Today survey, nearly 40 percent of Christian pastors are struggling with pornography. They seem especially vulnerable, due to their time alone, their legitimate use of computers and their fear of getting help because of the public nature of their jobs.

It is "one of the fastest growing problems in the lives of North American pastors today," according to pastorswives.org. "It has become such a common problem, that groups have formed which only exist to help ministers out of the entangled lives they find themselves living."

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has created a system for helping people overcome it.

Five years ago, the LDS Church tapped Mormon therapist Michael Gardner to head its 12-step pornography addiction program. He says the addiction afflicts 3 to 5 percent of Latter-day Saints (about the same rate as the rest of the country).

"I've seen people lose everything," he says, "their job, their marriage, their religion."

Anderson knows those dangers all too well. One day, he limped through the house, hobbled with back pain that he attributed to the stress of managing a large Dallas church and a growing family.

But the problem wasn't physical, he writes in his 2007 book, "Breaking the Silence: A Pastor's Story of Going Public About His Private Battle With Pornography." It was spiritual.

Anderson writes, "I had given in to my dark side and was headed down a path toward certain destruction."

He was not alone.

"Adolescents are very curious about their bodies and this thing called sex," says Jennifer Finlayson-Fife, an LDS psychotherapist in Chicago who specializes in couples counseling. "I know that masturbation and porn can be very toxic, but I would also say that flirting with these behaviors is a way for people to understand themselves as sexual beings, seeking to make sense of who they are and what sexuality is."

For most people, she says, "it's just curiosity that's important and legitimate."

Problems begin when the need becomes compulsive.

"My body seemed to have a mind of its own," Anderson writes.

During his years studying at the Adventist seminary, his addiction to online sex -- "a virtual Disneyland of pornography" -- took root.

Thereafter, being home alone or working in his pastor's study presented almost insurmountable temptations. Hotel rooms, with easy access to X-rated videos or free Internet streaming, were "a major trigger," where the sense of freedom and anonymity were "intoxicating."

For Anderson, there seemed no way out of the trap. And no peace while in it. Pornography addiction, experts say, is a symptom of deeper fractures.

Part of the problem of pornography is that "it's easy satisfaction," Finlayson-Fife says. "It doesn't require vulnerability and openness to another person."

Those who get hooked, she says, "are those who don't have sexual self-confidence and don't have much comfort with intimacy."

Constant porn use also undermines marriages, Finlayson-Fife says. "Some people will watch porn, then have those images in their head while having sex with their spouse. That makes them completely disconnected. They are using their spouse to have an experience that has nothing to do with them."

Gardner sees many dangers in pornography: It is not based in reality; it objectifies women; it distorts sexuality so that it doesn't match healthy relations; it erodes relationships; it destroys trust; and it undermines self-esteem.

"Pornography addiction thrives in secrecy," he says. "It produces depression and shame and guilt."

Anderson experienced all of that.

It "eats you," he says, "from the inside out."

Anderson thought that marrying Christina, a gorgeous young student he met at the Dallas Seventh-day Adventist church where he served as youth pastor, would be the end of his porn problem. What would be the need? he asked himself.

But it wasn't that easy.

Barely a month after his wedding, he turned again to his drug of choice. It took a few years, but eventually Christina began to see the signs. She thought at first he might be having an affair. The fear and uncertainty chiseled away at her self-worth, her trust in her spouse, and, ultimately, her faith in God.

"It tore me down to my core. I felt like I am not good enough," she told Message magazine. "I felt betrayed. ... I questioned our relationship and my entire marriage up to that point. I felt inadequate. Why would my husband have to look at women in books or on a computer screen? I felt alone."

She nearly divorced him.

"I looked to God hoping that once and for all he would take this thing from me," Anderson writes. "In those moments God revealed to me something that he had quietly whispered to me all along: I needed to tell someone."

He chose to tell Mike, a longtime friend and fellow pastor, who responded: "Join the crowd."

One group, New Life Partners in Missouri, is for the wives and family of porn-addicted pastors.

"It wouldn't matter how beautiful, how supportive, how caring, how anything you were," the website says. Your husband's sexual addiction "is not about you and it's not about sex."

Like Anderson, scores of other porn addicts have found their way free through church-related programs.

"I've seen people turn their lives around," Gardner says. "They can then live a life true to their religious values. If they are willing to work hard, they can certainly overcome the power of the addiction."

Anderson wants all addicts to know they can escape the cycle. Pornography is as powerful as cocaine, he says. "Just because people go through the waters of baptism doesn't mean they won't have to deal with it."