

- ²² Muck, p. 98.
- ²³ Rutter, p. 124.
- ²⁴ Pamela Cooper-White, "Soul Stealing: Power Relations in Pastoral Sexual Abuse," *The Christian Century*, February 20, 1991, p. 198.
- ²⁵ Rediger, pp. 15-16.
- ²⁶ Fortune, *Clergy Misconduct*, p. 64.
- ²⁷ Muck, p. 10.
- ²⁸ Jack Balswich and John Thoburn, "How Ministers Deal With Sexual Temptation" *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 39, No. 5, 1991, p. 284.

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Ethical Challenges of Ministerial Practice

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The Inherent Ethical Risks of Ministry

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The ethics and practice of ministry are front page news. We hear of the Reverend Jim Bakker's sexual relationship with a member of his church's staff. We watch as the Reverend Jimmy Swaggert, tears streaming down his face, confesses to "sins of the flesh." We read confusing reports of the Reverend F. Forrester Church's falling in love with a prominent church member.¹ We discover that diocesan officials knew that Father James Porter was molesting children in his parish thirty years before his recent arrest; nothing effective had been done to stop him.

Admittedly the media is more interested in reporting titillating sexual details than in clarifying ministerial ethics and practice. Still reporters make an astoundingly simple ethical assumption—that clergy who engage in sexualized behavior with those whom they serve as ministers are in violation of their profession's ethical standards of practice and guilty of professional misconduct. Indeed, ministerial misconduct is newsworthy because it contradicts most people's ethical expectations of clergy behavior and because it has become increasingly common.

Among those who practice the ministerial profession, ethical standards are more specifically considered. For example, what ethical standards are violated in the foregoing situations? Why are certain behaviors or actions considered misconduct? When a minister has a sexual relationship with a church staff member, is this behavior unethical because, as a married person, he has committed adultery? Is the behavior unethical because he employed his ministerial authority and power to pursue and cover up a sexual relationship with a church employee? When a minister falls in love with a congregant, is this behavior unethical because he has sexualized a professional relationship? Is it unethical only when the congregant complains and alleges that her needs and interests were ignored or abused by the minister's attention to his own personal needs and interests? Or is an intimate relationship with a congregant merely imprudent because love possessed a cleric from across a crowded chancel? Within the profession, there need to be bright lines indicating whether or not, and precisely in what ways, it is unethical in any specific situation for clergy to sexualize professional relationships or to engage in sexualized behavior with the people they are called to serve as ministers.

I begin this paper with a basic premise: when clergy sexualize relationships with those whom they are called to serve, ministerial ethics are violated.² Discussion by ministers on clergy sexual ethics has focussed too often on defining ethical standards by identifying exceptions to the rules. "What about single ministers?" some ask. Are personal relationships, friendships or intimacies, forbidden within their professional situations? "What about love's surprise?" others ask. Should allowances be made for love when it honorably appears even if in a relationship with a congregant? Focussing on exceptions blurs the bright lines of ethical standards. The increasing incidence of ministerial misconduct and the ethical expectations of those served suggest that a clearer understanding of ethical standards is essential.

Ministry is a profession. Ministers possess a "specialized knowledge and understanding" requiring significant education and must meet certain "standards of performance." Appropriate to their role, ministers are accorded a power and authority to be exercised in the best interests of their congregants.³ As professionals, ministers—individually and as a group—are responsible for clarifying and for maintaining the ethical standards of practice. In the performance of their duties, they are accountable to each other and to these standards.

Ministers as a professional group need to understand what ethical issues are raised by sexualized behavior or relationships and why these are considered misconduct. Even more, when ethical standards are determined, those who uphold and enforce these need to understand why ministers may have difficulty meeting them. While many factors influence the outcome of any situation or behavior, some regrettably outside of one's control, ministers as a professional group need to remember that it is always the responsibility of a professional to meet the standards of practice.⁴

Codes of Professional Practice

The frequency of misconduct may suggest that some confusion exists as to what is appropriate and ethical ministerial conduct regarding sexual relationships with congregants and that some ministers experience considerable difficulty in adhering to ethical standards. Nevertheless, professional ethics guidelines of nearly all clergy associations are very clear. A review of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association "Code of Professional Practice" reveals specific statements that prohibit sexualizing professional ministerial relationships.⁵

Under "Congregation," the code states, "I will remember that a congregation places special trust in its professional leadership and the members of the congregation allow a minister to become a part of their lives on the basis of that trust. I will not exploit that trust for my own gratification." Persons

who relate to a minister initially in his or her professional capacity are not available to a minister for intimate relationships in which the minister's private nonprofessional needs are primarily gratified.

Further, the code reads, "I will not invade the private and intimate bonds of others' lives, nor will I trespass on those bonds for my own advantage or need when they are disturbed. In any relationship of intimate confidentiality, I will not exploit the needs of another person for my own." A person's vulnerability or need in times of crisis shall not be an occasion for addressing or fulfilling a minister's own private needs. This section becomes very specific as to what sexual relationships or practices are prohibited: "I will not engage in sexual activities with a member of the congregation who is not my spouse or partner, if I am married or in a committed relationship." Adultery is clearly prohibited and understood to include those who present themselves in a committed relationship but who do not have access to legal marital standing, e.g., gay and lesbian couples.

More specifically, the code details, "if I am single, before becoming sexually involved with a person in the congregation, I will take special care to examine my commitment, motives, intentionality and the nature of such activity and its consequences for myself, the other person and the congregation." Single ministers, who by definition cannot commit adultery, although their congregants can, are cautioned to be exceedingly prudent in developing intimate relationships with congregants. An earlier section, "Self," discusses ethical considerations of the minister as a sexual being: "As a sexual being, I will recognize the power that ministry gives me and refrain from practices which are harmful to others and which endanger my integrity or my professional effectiveness." The code acknowledges that sexual relationships presume commitments of integrity that may be in conflict with the commitments and integrity of a minister's professional role and responsibilities. Since a minister cannot predict the future, the code may be heard to discourage single ministers from developing intimate relationships with congregants in order to limit the risk of endangering their professional integrity and effectiveness.

Clearly, in articulating clear guidelines and prohibitions for sexual behaviors and relationships by ministers, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Code of Professional Practice recognizes the risk that these may occur within professional relationships. The code indicates that such sexual behaviors and relationships have a high probability of resulting in a professional's lack of integrity, ineffectiveness, or exploitation.

Frequency and Risk

Estimates of the frequency of ministerial misconduct through sexualized relationships or sexual abuse confirms this inherent risk. A *Christianity Today* survey asked clergy: "Since you've been in the local church ministry, have

you ever done anything with someone (not your spouse) that you feel was sexually inappropriate?" Twenty-three percent of respondents answered yes; 12 percent reported having sexual intercourse with someone other than their spouse during their ministry.⁶ Peter Rutter estimates that 6 to 10 percent of all clergy, about the same as for psychotherapists, have engaged in sexual relationships with the congregants.⁷ G. Lloyd Rediger estimates that "10 percent of clergy (mostly male) have been or are engaged in sexual malfeasance. Another 15 percent are on the verge—waiting for opportunities. Many of these clergy do not realize how vulnerable and close to disaster they are."⁸ Citing a 1984 study conducted by Richard Allen Blackmon, Marie Fortune indicates that as many as 38.6 percent of ministers surveyed report having sexual contact with a church member; 12.7 percent report having sexual intercourse with a church member.⁹ Clearly, there exists both a significant occurrence and a considerable risk of clergy engaging in sexualized behavior with client-congregants.

Why is the risk for clergy misconduct so high? What is the nature of ministry that contributes to the risk that clergy will engage in practices that sexually abuse client-congregants or that are simply ineffective and poor practice? What is it about the ministry or ministers that increases the risk they will engage in sexualized relationships with those whom they are called to serve?

An examination of four aspects of the profession—role, common ministerial personality, material, and work situation—will reveal several possible explanations for the high risk for clergy misconduct by sexual abuse or inappropriate sexual behavior and relationships.

The Role of the Minister

Janet Fishburn states that "clergy adultery is a sign of confusion about the professional role and status of ministers working in a 'marginal social institution.'" ¹⁰ The relative decline of the ministerial profession in the last century has marginalized clergy and fostered an ambiguous understanding of the clergy role.¹¹

Indeed, a minister's role is an ambiguous one. Clergy are called to be worship leaders and preachers, counselors and corporate heads, social activists and change agents, moral models and heroes. Individuals come to clergy for everything from religious services and pastoral care to financial and medical assistance and career counseling. Expectations of what clergy can accomplish are enormous, while the reality of what clergy observe they are able to accomplish is much less. Despair about one's professional competence or effectiveness can result.

Amid this ambiguity, clergy may engage in activities outside their responsibilities. Out of a wish to be perceived as productive, they may neglect the basic work of their profession. Despair and role confusion

increase the risk for unethical conduct because a minister may rationalize: "If I show this woman who is suffering in an unhappy marriage that she is loveable and desirable, by relating intimately with her, I can turn her life around and save her soul."

Unclear about their professional role, many clergy nevertheless are ever busy getting the job done. "Workaholism is the single most widespread social disease among the ordained."¹² Ministers take on tasks and engagements that may be inappropriate and unnecessary. Their schedules become hectic and harried. While their vision of what they are supposed to be doing may not be accomplished by all this busyness, they know that they are trying their hardest. But something is missing.

Workaholism increases the risk of unethical behavior because it heightens the fantasy that ministers can be all things to all people. Carlson notes that ministers "work hard not to upset people. It is the very need to please that puts [them] at particular risk with people who come talking of their lack of fulfillment, their longing, and their hurt. [Ministers] want so much to be able to fill that void."¹³ Ministers who, despite all their hard work, fail to effect their vision may become both personally and professionally dissatisfied and unfulfilled. In an effort to feel fulfilled they may engage in unethical conduct, filling the void of others in any way they can, however inappropriate to their ministerial role.

The Person of the Minister

On the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator 67 percent of ministers are feeling-oriented and 44 percent are both feeling- and intuition-oriented. Intuition- or feeling-oriented people have many of the gifts needed for ministry; they are empathetic, charismatic, and articulate. But other characteristics include "needing to rescue people," "wanting everyone to like them," "having a hard time saying no," personalizing situations, and fostering dependency.¹⁴ Typically ministers may rescue others to save themselves. In short, the qualities that make people good ministers also put them at risk for emotional overinvolvement with their congregants. Emotional overinvolvement increases the risk that professional relationships will become personalized and, thus, that sexual misconduct will occur.

Overinvolvement may explain why ministers often admit to a pervasive loneliness. Seeking personal fulfillment through satisfying the needs of others, they may fail to satisfy their own personal needs. When ministers were asked what they believed were the major factors that led them into sexual relationships with congregants, 78 percent mentioned "sexual and emotional attraction" and 41 percent mentioned "marital dissatisfaction."¹⁵ Another study concluded that commitments to satisfying personal relationships or to a marriage partner, while not a guarantee, were

a strong deterrent to sexual involvements with congregants.¹⁶

In the absence of a fulfilling private life or relationships, a minister may misuse professional relationships to satisfy unmet personal needs. The risk that a professional relationship will be sexualized is significantly increased by the personalization of a professional relationship.

The capacity to be empathetic is not only a common personality trait of clergy, but also a trained skill in ministry. In a professional relationship, particularly a counseling or pastoral situation, a minister interacts empathetically with a client/congregant. Client/congregants may experience themselves as accepted, supported, respected and understood. This experience may assist and empower them, among other things, to endure tragedies, to make changes in their lives, or to enrich their spiritual practices. An empathetic relationship with a minister can be particularly satisfying and enlivening for a congregant.

Empathetic relationships are satisfying to ministers as well. In expressing empathy, a minister may feel particularly fulfilled. Any relationship in which one feels fulfilled can be expected to be desired and cultivated more than others that do not provide that feeling. A minister may mistake a fulfilling professional relationship characterized by empathy as a personal one of romantic love. In the absence of a satisfying personal life in which one has opportunities to feel fulfilled, appreciated, and loved, the risk that a fulfilling professional relationship will become sexualized is increased.

Because clergy often socialize, live, and work in the same community, inevitable dual relationships develop. Dual relationships are those in which a minister is expected to fulfill two or more different roles and potentially competing responsibilities. A minister also may be a friend, a confessor, a teacher, an administrator, a fellow parent. Blending personal needs and professional responsibilities, dual relationships have the potential for conflicts of interest. Like therapists who attempt to treat a close friend or physicians who practice medicine with their own family, members of the clergy jeopardize the quality and effectiveness of their professional practice when personal and professional relationships combine. Whether a minister is acting as a friend or pastor may become unclear to laity and clergy.¹⁷

Dual relationships that form in the course of a minister's work put clergy at risk for misconduct because the privileges and power of a professional relationship may be inappropriately or abusively used to cultivate a personal relationship. Personal and professional relationships are inherently different. A professional relationship is intended to meet the congregant's need for ministerial service. Professionals are accorded the power, trust, and authority with which to accomplish their responsibilities. Professionals are expected to act in the best interest of those whom they serve, even if to do so may mean a denial of their own immediate desires.

A personal relationship is intended to meet the needs and interests of both persons involved. Neither person is considered primarily responsible

for assessing what these might be for the other person or for determining whether the other person's needs are being met. Only when persons possess equal power may they assert and negotiate their needs within a personal relationship.

What puts ministers in dual relationships at risk for unethical behavior are potential conflicts of interest. Competing or conflicting demands may develop between a minister's interest in an intimate personal relationship and a minister's professional responsibilities. When congregants come to a professional for ministerial service, they do so because the professional has more power and authority in the area in which help is requested. Ministers and congregants do not possess or exercise equal power. If in the interest of pursuing a personal relationship, ministers exercise the power they possess in their professional role, ministers can no longer be certain that they are meeting the ministerial needs of the other or that the best interests of the other are being served. Because they are not peers, the congregant cannot be understood to give free consent to a sexual relationship.¹⁸ A minister can never presume that a professional-turned-personal relationship is a mutual one between consenting adults free from coercion and fear.

In addition to the power and authority given ministers because of their professional standing, the symbolic power of the ministry magnifies the personal power of the minister.¹⁹ A minister represents the whole of the congregation and is the depository of the religious tradition and the functional representative of God. The minister functions as a mediator and interpreter of God's actions and interest in a congregant's life.

A contributing factor to this blurring of personal and professional relationships is the intimate nature of traditional and ethical clergy/congregant conversation. The pastoral role by its very nature gives the pastor access to people's lives on a very immediate and intimate level. The pastor is the only helping professional who can initiate contact with a client.²⁰ This access can be of great help during vulnerable periods—times of loss, illness, or upset. But it can also provide excuses to talk about very personal issues and to be together more frequently and under professionally inappropriate circumstances. Ministry fosters intimacy. Expressions of interest and caring may be confused by congregants for sexual or romantic interest. Vulnerable congregants are likely to trust the minister even in the face of behavior that they would find unreasonable from others.

Rutter suggests that the vulnerability and complete trust of a female client may be particularly arousing to a male professional. "I discovered at first hand [in my own practice] just how passionate and dissolving the erotic atmosphere can become in relationships in which the man holds the power and the woman places trust and hope in him."²¹ The inherent closeness and intimacy of the pastoral relationship increases the risk of engaging in misconduct by sexualizing professional relationships.

The Nature of Material Explored in Ministry

In the sharing of intimate matters within the ministerial responsibility, it is easy to confuse the sexual and spiritual nature of the material. In spiritual experiences, as in sexual ones, one loosens inhibitions, cultivates closeness, seeks a surrendering openness and vulnerability, and experiences deep emotions.²² The similarity between sexual and spiritual experiences is what led Bernini, in his 17th century marble statue of St. Theresa to depict the saint pierced in the heart by an angel's flaming golden arrow and to display her spiritual ecstasy as sensual and physical. Sexual intercourse is employed as a symbol of spiritual intimacy, even for intimacy with God. A relationship that moves one, emotionally or spiritually, may stimulate a desire for deepest union. The exercise of this desire may lead to sexual rather than spiritual behavior. Because of this confusion between sexual and spiritual material, a ministerial relationship is at risk for being sexualized when the actual need and desire is spiritual.

If not avoided, the confusion and consequent risk can have serious consequences. Between minister and congregant there is an assumption of vulnerability and trust. Congregants bare their souls to a minister. "This is a sacred and dangerous condition," writes Rutter. "Her spirit reaches out to him and his to her."²³ When vulnerabilities are exploited, a congregant's sacred space is violated. A congregant's mental health and sense of self may be shattered. When a professional relationship is sexualized rather than spiritualized, it is a stealing of souls.²⁴ The role of spiritual guide and support is unexercised and misused.

Rediger argues that the confusion between sexual and spiritual experiences occurs as well within the minister. The confusion about the nature of the material may lead to a further confusion or neglect of a minister's spiritual responsibilities. The risk of unethical sexual conduct by a minister is increased. "The [ministerial] role carries with it a natural charisma of mystical closeness to God," observes Rediger. Add to this charisma the fact that a human being resides inside the role and the presence of some "physical attractiveness and pleasant style" and one has "a sexual aura that captivates, inspires, and deludes." Rediger finds in his work with clergy a "consistent connection between the stimulation of the role and the attraction and satisfaction derived from role performance."²⁵ In sum, the ministry is "sexually stimulating not just to laity, as has long been assumed, but to clergy as well."

Unaware of these confusions, ministers may express feelings of vulnerability or of being threatened. The interest of "sexually stimulating" congregants may make them feel appreciated but also uncomfortable and powerless. Fortune has noted that "vulnerability is not a feeling [but] the condition of having less power relative to someone."²⁶ In a professional

relationship, ministers have greater power than those they serve. Ministers, as professionals who are accountable to specific ethical standards of practice, are responsible for what happens in a professional relationship. Among these ethical standards is the responsibility to use their professional power to heal and not to harm.

The feeling ministers have when they describe themselves as feeling vulnerable is more appropriately described as anxiety. Since the ministerial role places clergy in situations where there exists an inherent risk of "crossing the boundaries" of one's professional relationship and of violating one's responsibilities, one might feel appropriately anxious when guarding against that risk if seriously challenged by others. When one is at risk of violating an ethical standard, it is professionally useful for an emotional alarm like discomforting anxiety to go off. Such an alarm causes one to stop and assess one's actions and to be certain that one is acting in a professional, appropriate and ethical manner. The anxiety and ethical challenge, however, are not raised by a lack of power but by the compelling question of how to exercise one's professional power to avoid the risk and to act effectively.

The Work Circumstances of Ministers

In the midst of these anxious feelings and professional challenges, it would be useful to have the support and counsel of other ministers with similar experiences. But ministers work in relative isolation from one another. Regular ongoing peer support and review are rare. Individual clergy work not under the watchful eyes of their colleagues but by themselves in separate congregations and community settings. Generally, they do not enjoy the benefit of reflecting together on the practice of their profession or on their accountability to ethical standards. The lack of accountability and supervision increases the risk of unethical sexual conduct.

Twenty-three percent of clergy polled in a *Christianity Today* survey answered yes when asked: Since you've been in the local church ministry, have you ever done anything with someone (not your spouse) that you feel was sexually inappropriate? A startling 78 percent admitted to knowing of other clerics who were sexually involved with a congregant.²⁷ Clearly, individual clergy are interpreting ethical standards situationally. The risk that their interpretations will be in error and that they will rationalize behavior to serve their own needs and their perceived needs of others is increased by this ethical isolation. Without supervision and accountability and apparently without commonly held and consistently enforced standards, the risk of unethical sexual conduct increases.

In a study of ministers who had engaged in unethical sexual conduct, Jack Balswich and John Thoburn concluded that the likelihood "of a minister's involvement in illicit sexual behavior" could not be predicted

solely by "the presence of unfulfilled personal needs, a less than adequate marital relationship, lack of peer accountability, and spiritual coldness and immaturity." Rather, the single most important factor in predicting misconduct was the lack of safeguards existing within the ministerial role.²⁸ In the absence of protection or prevention methods, the clergy role's inherent risk for misconduct was undiminished. A lack of clarity about ethical standards and an inconsistency in enforcement and accountability, themselves straightforward methods of protection and prevention, further increased the risk of misconduct occurring. Clergy associations need not only to create clear ethical standards, but also to extend to one another counsel and support that would safeguard them against the inherent ethical risks for misconduct. Because the ministerial role is inherently at risk for unethical conduct through the sexualization of professional relationships, external supports and safeguards are a clear requirement for any ministerial association interested in reducing the incidence of clergy misconduct.

Initially ethical standards were created for the protection of the congregants, but they need to be understood as providing support and safeguards for the professional effectiveness and for the well-being of ministers as well. For an association of clergy, safeguards also protect the integrity and reputation of the ministry itself. While clergy misconduct by sexual abuse is a clear ethical violation of ministerial standards of practice, it may be in some instances an ineffective response or maladaptation to the inherent risks of the profession. Clergy need to be supervised and supported in appropriately attending to ethical standards as well as to their personal needs and well-being.

Conclusions

The ministerial profession possesses an inherent and high risk for misconduct through sexualized behavior or abuse because of its ambiguous role, the personal dynamics and qualities of clergy, the intimate nature of the material with which clergy work, and the minimal supervision and support clergy receive. This conclusion is no excuse and provides offenders with no apology. Rather it suggests that clergy must be held accountable to the ethical standards of their profession through education, role clarity, supervision, and enforced standards. In particular, ministers must be held accountable to established standards—consistent enforcement, clear consequences, swift response by officials, public disclosure, and reparation for victims. In addition, clergy must be supported in their efforts to counter the inherent risk of misconduct—guidance for appropriately attending to one's personal needs, assistance in clarifying one's professional role and responsibilities, clearer understanding of ethical standards—in ways that are professionally ethical and effective and personally healthy and fulfilling.

End Notes

- ¹ Rusty Unger, "Church of the Heavenly Unrest" in *New York Magazine*, October 14, 1991.
- ² For an in-depth analysis, turn to Marie Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred?* (Harper & Row, New York, 1989); Peter Rutter, *Sex in the Forbidden Zone* (Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., Los Angeles, 1989); and Karen Lebacqz and Ronald G. Barton, *Sex in The Parish* (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1991).
- ³ Marie Fortune, *Clergy Misconduct: Sexual Abuse in the Ministerial Relationship*. (Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, Seattle, Washington, 1992), p. 12.
- ⁴ Fortune, *Clergy Misconduct*, p. 14.
- ⁵ *Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association Guidelines* are available from the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association c/o 25 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108.
- ⁶ Terry Muck, *Sins of the Body: Ministry in a Sexual Society* (Word Publishing, Dallas, 1989), p. 9.
- ⁷ Rutter, p. 36.
- ⁸ G. Lloyd Rediger, *Ministry and Sexuality: Cases, Counseling, Care* (Fortess Press, Minneapolis, 1990), p. 2.
- ⁹ Fortune, *Clergy Misconduct*, p. 13.
- ¹⁰ Janet Fishburn, "Male Clergy" in *Pastoral Ethics*, edited by Gaylord Royce (Abingdon Press, 1988), pp. 92–93.
- ¹¹ See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1977).
- ¹² Mary Pellauer, "Sex, Power, and the Family of God," *Christianity and Crisis*, February 16, 1987, p. 49.
- ¹³ Robert J. Carlson, "Battling Sexual Indiscretion," *Ministry*, January 1985, p. 5.
- ¹⁴ Lebacqz and Barton, p. 79.
- ¹⁵ Muck, p. 10.
- ¹⁶ Carlson, p. 4.
- ¹⁷ Fortune, *Clergy Misconduct*, p. 54 ff.
- ¹⁸ Fortune, *Clergy Misconduct*, p. 37 ff.
- ¹⁹ Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred?*, p. 102.
- ²⁰ Fortune, *Clergy Misconduct*, p. 42.
- ²¹ Rutter, p. 5 ff.