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Making a Healthy Congregation: Conversations about Clergy Sexual Abuse

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by David Pooler

Churches and congregations have responsibility for people's wellbeing including teaching spiritual principles, forming character, creating opportunities to serve others, and helping people contribute to the greater good. People involved in congregational life expect safety, nurturing, and freedom to grow and flourish in that environment. However, in the United States and around the world people in congregations are sexually abused by trusted leaders. And to be precise, 3 percent of women who regularly attend church in the U.S. reported being the object of a sexual advance by a church leader after the age of eighteen (Chavez & Garland, 2009).

Upon reading this, please do not think to yourself that it could never happen in your congregation because any church where this has happened or any survivor I have spoken with believed the same thing until it did happen. I have also learned that perpetrators of abuse can be gifted, knowledgeable, endearing, and highly effective leaders, making any detection ahead of time very difficult and the aftermath challenging to comprehend.

When church leaders abuse people it is devastating, but it is far more tragic when congregations have no idea what to do or how to support or help victims, or each other. And what I can tell you from my research, most churches do not know what to do and quickly get overwhelmed. Blaming people is the easiest way that people in congregations try to discharge the pain of the betrayal, but it is the least effective way forward and by its very nature cannot promote conversation, healing, or offer solutions. The reality is that clergy are fallible and can abuse congregants and talking openly and acknowledging the possibility is critically important.

I would like to offer some ways for churches to frame this issue so that they can work to prevent it and respond effectively when it happens. The conversation about preventing abuse can be nested in a larger discussion about healthy congregations, safe spaces, and flourishing. Being a part of a congregation should be life giving with dialogue focused on transformation, healing, and growth. But it should also be grounded in the reality of what is broken and untransformed and that all people, clergy and laity alike, can have problems that are not obvious at first glance. Christians need to work to be intentional, deliberate, and nuanced in describing what is healthy and what is not. Health must be juxtaposed against the lack of it; therefore churches need to know what constitutes abuse and call it abuse in order to create a healthy environment.

Clergy Sexual Abuse happens when a person with religious authority intentionally uses their role, position, and power to sexually harass, exploit, or engage in sexual activity with a person. This involves sexualizing conversations (including on the phone, through social media or email), asking for or transmitting unwanted sexual images, touching or hugging people who do not want to be touched, pushing for sexual involvement, creating pressure and hostility when boundaries are set, using sexual language and jokes, pressing or rubbing up against a person, or invading personal space. The sexual activity can include but is not limited to touching sexual organs (over or under clothing), kissing, oral sex, masturbation, intercourse, and rape. Clergy Sexual Abuse is primarily about the misuse of power by the perpetrator and the inability of the victim to provide consent because of that power differential. The person with more power is always the one responsible for both setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries with people.

Next, churches need to develop and refine a trauma sensitive lens through which they view victims of Clergy Sexual Abuse and frame

healing. When abuse occurs it will be damaging and hurtful, and there will primary and secondary victims (i.e. the person abused and members of the congregation who are most affected by it). Trauma occurs when an event overwhelms a person's ability to cope and leaves them fearing annihilation or harm. The circumstances commonly include abuse of power, betrayal of trust, entrapment, and helplessness.

Early recovery from trauma should focus on safety and stabilization of the victim. The most effective way a congregation can facilitate this is through believing the victim and validating their experience by calling what happened abuse. An unbelieving and unsupportive first response will cause further trauma. Second, ensure that the survivor is kept within circles of support and not excluded from congregational life in any way. This includes clear honest communication and referral to other professionals when appropriate. Lastly, meet the survivor where they are; allowing them to grieve, protest, and be angry.

We are living in a time when our society needs a powerful witness of love, care, and transformation more than ever. One of the most tangible ways congregations can foster a powerful witness along these lines is to identify and train a point person(s) to whom members can go in crisis: an advocate. The advocate should be objective, trauma informed, knowledgeable about exploitation, abuse, interpersonal violence, and cognizant about clergy sexual abuse. This person should know church policies as well as community resources. Broken people are drawn to spaces and places that live and respond to life as it is, not as we wish it would be.

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