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Sexual misconduct in church won't disappear

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Probably when anyone thinks about clergy sexual misconduct, what first (and maybe only) comes to mind is the priest abuse scandal in the Catholic church.

And, for sure, it has deserved the attention it has received, given the appalling behavior of some members of the clergy and given that most victims have been children, the most vulnerable members of the family of faith.

But the result of this misguided myopia is that faith communities have not paid nearly enough attention to the wider issue of clergy sexual abuse happening with disgusting regularity in Protestant churches and other traditions.

A new book has helped me understand the widespread nature of the problem. And it has offered some ideas for how to deal with it when it happens and, beyond that, how to prevent it.

In Clergy Sexual Misconduct: A Systems Approach to Prevention, Intervention, and Oversight, authors John Thoburn, Rob Baker and Maria Dal Maso note that "nearly 10 percent of Protestant pastors have sexual contact with someone other than a spouse while in the ministry (and) more than 30 percent of ministers engage in sexual behavior that they consider inappropriate ..."

And those troubling figures don't even take into account the "15 percent of ministers (who) qualify as addicted to Internet pornography."

As much as those of us who are Protestant might wish to deny the problem, it's hard to miss. Even my own family was victimized by clergy sexual misconduct in the early 1990s when the married man who was pastor of my congregation had an affair with the woman who then was my wife. So I get this issue.

If other Protestants are honest about reality, they can look much closer to home to find examples of the problem without having to drag up such high-profile cases as those of Jim Bakker, Ted Haggard, Gordon MacDonald or Jimmy Swaggart.

The question, thus, is not whether there's a problem. Clearly there is. The question is what churches are doing about it. The sad answer for Protestants today is similar to the unacceptable answer that eventually surfaced when that question was asked a few years ago among Catholics: not enough.

What first must happen, of course, is that people in the pews and their lay leaders need to be convinced that the problem is real and that they have a responsibility to recognize that and respond in appropriate ways.

But what really is an appropriate response? Should we hire private investigators to spy on all the pastors? Of course not.

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The new book on clergy sexual misconduct suggests something more reasonable and no doubt more effective: understanding what leads pastors toward such misconduct and working to remove or at least mitigate those causes.

The authors say it's important to grasp that humans are complex beings with many forces and stresses at work in their lives. And just as the triune God is in a loving and wholesome relationship with God's own self, so clergy must understand their own internal and external relations and how they influence their behavior and attitudes.

As the authors write: "Ill health is related to damage or brokenness in the ecology of these relationships, resulting in a life that is unbalanced, unfocused, and disintegrated."

As someone who has known many members of the clergy of various faith traditions over many years, I no longer am surprised to find some whose lives are unbalanced, unfocused and disintegrated. The miracle to me is how many members of the clergy live in balanced, well-focused ways with mostly healthy relationships.

But sexual misconduct is a problem that will never disappear. The human sex drive is simply too powerful.

That's why lay leaders in churches must insist on confronting the issue in a systematic way -- just as the Catholic church has had to create new systems for identifying and preventing abuse of children.

Otherwise we're just begging for trouble.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for *The Star's* website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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