

# Abuse means betrayal, panelists say

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**By Ken Camp**

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WACO—Sexual misconduct occurs among ministers at a rate higher than among other trusted professions such as doctors and lawyers, a retired seminary ethics professor said.

At its heart, clergy sexual abuse represents betrayal by a minister who abuses the trust of a vulnerable and wounded person, Joe Trull told a ministerial ethics conference at Baylor University's Truett Seminary.

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Trull participated in a panel discussion on clergy sexual abuse during the conference, sponsored by the Christian Ethics Today Foundation.

“Clergy sexual exploitation is not primarily about sex. It is an abuse of power expressed in a highly destructive sexual manner,” Trull said.

While pedophile priests in the Roman Catholic Church have captured much of the media attention, clergy sexual abuse is “not just a Roman Catholic problem,” he said.

Several studies during the last 25 years across denominational lines have demonstrated consistent results—about 10 percent to 12 percent of ministers acknowledged they engaged in sexual intercourse with church members, and roughly one-fourth to one-third admitted to sexually inappropriate behavior, he noted. In more than 90 percent of the cases of sexual abuse in Protestant churches, the misconduct occurs between a male minister and female church member.

Quoting Marie Fortune, a recognized authority on clergy sexual abuse, Trull said abusive ministers usually fall into two categories:

- **Predators.** Typically, they are manipulative and controlling, but they also can be charismatic and charming. They seek out powerless and vulnerable women—generally—whom they can use. They are sociopaths who will continue to abuse their position if given the opportunity, leaving behind a trail of victims, Trull asserted.
- **Wanderers.** Generally, they are less successful professionally and personally than predators. Because they feel inadequate, they may give in to temptation and violate a boundary with another needy person. Typically, wanderers feel shame and guilt for their one-time failure. Given time and professional help, they often can “find their way back to wholeness and restoration,” Trull said.

When a minister abuses an individual, the church also feels victimized, and it may react in inappropriate ways, said panelist Philip Wise, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Lubbock.

“Churches often do what families do—keep it quiet and try to heal the hurt,” he said. “But often, people who cross a barrier once will cross it again unless there are appropriate consequences that occur and appropriate protections put into place.”

James Carter, retired director of church-minister relations for the Louisiana Baptist Convention, agreed. “What often happens in a church (when abuse occurs) is that they circle the wagons and try to keep it quiet. Often, they pass along the problem to somebody else.”

Ministers can avoid many problems by making it a policy never to be alone with a person of the opposite sex other than a spouse, Carter said. In private counseling sessions, he suggested always making sure someone is in a nearby room.

Wise told the conference he will counsel “anybody, anytime” about spiritual matters, but he refers all other counseling needs to qualified professionals. Knowledge of church members’ intimate secrets can render a minister ineffective in his role as pastor to those members, he noted.

“As a pastor, there are some things I don’t need to know,” he said.

Churches benefit from having gender balance in their ministerial staff when it comes to offering pastoral counsel, said Julie Pennington-Russell, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco. Depending on the nature of the counseling, some topics are best dealt with by a counselor of the same sex, she noted.

“My policy is that I don’t counsel people more than three times. After that, then I refer them,” she said, pointing out the danger of boundary violations

**in extended counseling relationships.**

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