

Stepping over the line: Should sexually straying clergy be restored to ministry?

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DALLAS—Some Baptists consider sexual misconduct by clergy the unpardonable sin when it comes to hiring church staff, and many survivors of abuse agree. But others say it depends on which scarlet letter the minister wears—“W” for “wanderer” or a “P” for “predator.”

Ethicist Joe Trull accepts the distinction between wanderers and predators. He explained the difference between the two types of offenders in a book he and James Carter, former director of church-minister relations with the Louisiana Baptist Convention, wrote on ministerial ethics.

Building on categories first proposed by Marie Fortune—a pioneer in research related to sexual exploitation by clergy—Trull said predators are people who actively seek opportunities to sexually abuse their prey. The

predator often is a dynamic figure with a charismatic personality who may play the part of a loving and concerned pastor, but he abuses his power and position to manipulate vulnerable people.

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In contrast, wanderers tend to be vulnerable, needy people who are drawn to other vulnerable, needy people. Wanderers often are less successful personally and professionally than their peers, and they gravitate to people who will enhance their low self-esteem. After crossing boundaries into inappropriate behavior, wanderers generally feel shame, remorse and regret.

"The wanderer may be a candidate for restoration. Predators don't think they've done anything wrong. Most predators are the type of people who think they are above the law and the rules don't apply to them. ... They should never be in the ministry or in any vocation where they are with vulnerable people whom they can take advantage of," Trull said in an interview.

Around 1990, the Baptist General Convention of Texas Ministers Counseling Service launched a restoration program to help ministers put their lives back together after sexual misconduct.

The two-year program began with six months of career assessment, intense personal counseling and prohibition on any ministry-related involvement. During the second six months, the minister was allowed limited volunteer involvement in ministry and was required to participate in monthly counseling sessions. In the next six months, the minister was permitted to do vocational Christian work under close supervision. The last six months was spent preparing for re-entry into full-time vocational ministry.

BGCT Counseling and Psychological Services no longer sponsors a structured restoration program.

Christa Brown, a spokes-person for clergy sex abuse survivors, rejects the notion that any abuser should be restored to ministry under any circumstances.

"In the event a minister has committed sexual abuse, he should not be restored to service in ministry in any position in which others look up to him as a spiritual leader," Brown said. "The weapons used by clergy sex abusers are the faith and trust of others and the mantle of authority that the church and denomination puts on their shoulders. These weapons must be taken away and cannot safely be put into their hands again."

Brown acknowledges a distinction between misconduct and abuse. She

criticizes Baptists for the tendency “to lump all sexually related matters under the same umbrella and call it ‘sexual misconduct.’”

“For example, I would characterize the much-publicized Ted Haggard scenario as ‘misconduct,’ but from the news accounts I saw, it does not appear to have been abusive,” she explained. Haggard resigned as head of the National Association of Evangelicals after a Colorado man alleged Haggard paid him for drugs and sex. Haggard was fired as pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs after he admitted to unspecified acts of “sexual immorality.”

Most victims with whom Brown has been in contact were abused as children or teenagers, but age alone does not determine whether a person is a victim of abuse or simply a participant in sexual misconduct, she insisted.

“Ministers can also sexually abuse adult congregants,” she said. “In Texas, it is a felony for a clergyman to use his position of spiritual trust to sexually exploit another—even another adult.”

Brown rejects the distinction between wanderers and predators, and she believes it creates a climate for continued abuse.

“From the many accounts I hear, it appears that Southern Baptists often wind up protecting the predator on the theory that he may be merely a wanderer. In doing so, they leave countless unsuspecting sheep at risk. No good shepherd would take such risks,” she said.

“Even if those who make this distinction are correct in recognizing two categories of offenders, Baptist leaders are still making a huge and terrible mistake in that they are effectively choosing to err on the side of restoring the wanderers rather than on the side of protecting against the predators.

“Even if there is some percentage who can legitimately be characterized as

mere wanderers, are church and denominational leaders so very certain that they can tell the difference that they are willing to risk allowing serial predators to move on to other prey for the sake of giving wanderers another chance in another position of trust with another unsuspecting flock of congregants?"

Emily Row Prevost, who works in the BGCT congregational leadership development area, stressed the harm done by any clergy sexual misconduct, regardless how it is characterized.

"We are concerned with protecting people from situations in which they could be hurt," she said. "Whether you distinguish between predators and wanderers or not, it is important for us to recognize that in any act of clergy sexual misconduct, people get hurt. The victim, the family of the perpetrator, the church and the community must all deal, in differing degrees, with pain, betrayal and issues of trust."

In Baptist life, decisions about whether an offender should be restored to vocational ministry rest with individual congregations, she emphasized.

"Because Baptist churches are autonomous, this is a decision each church must decide for itself after diligent prayer, study and thorough investigation. Also, circumstances vary greatly," she said, noting the state convention has services to help churches make informed decisions.

"But the decisions are up to the congregations."

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