

Opinion: Don't call it an affair. Call it abuse of power

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(ABP) — The murder trial of former pastor Matt Baker in Waco, Texas, [last week](#) was mesmerizing for many reasons. It involved sex, lies, premeditated murder, pornography and a clergy member. It should have been a work of fiction; it should never have happened in real life.

Even as we grieve for the victim's parents and her two daughters, we must not overlook that, initially, there was another victim. Long before she engaged in a sexual relationship with Matt Baker, Vanessa Bulls, in the midst of divorce, was just a young woman attending a church seeking comfort and guidance in her life. The pastor of the church she chose to visit offered to counsel her.



We cannot and should not dismiss the chain of events that followed and led, almost incomprehensibly, to the murder of a young mother whose parents and daughters now have an irreplaceable void in their lives. But if we focus on how this extramarital relationship began, we see a textbook example of clergy sexual misconduct, a felony offense in Texas according to the state penal code (Chapter 22: Assaultive Offensives). Matt Baker's crime of sexual misconduct as a religious leader — long before he plotted to add murder — was not only immoral but criminal.

During the past four years, I have conducted research on clergy sexual misconduct in order to find approaches to prevent it. I wish that Baker's initial offense was an isolated incident. It isn't. Our research found that one

of every 33 women in a congregation in America has experienced sexual harassment or sexual misconduct from her religious leader at some time in her adult life. The average American attends a congregation of 400 adults, so that's an average of seven women per congregation. Of course, it is rare that clergy sexual misconduct involves murder, although the suicide rate among victims is high. I have conducted interviews with more than 80 people from all over the country and from more than 30 religious groups. They described how they were victimized by religious leaders, blamed themselves for being vulnerable, and remained silent, trapped in their shame.

First, let's name what Matt Baker did accurately; it wasn't simply an affair; it was an illegal abuse of power.

Clergy sexual misconduct with adults is a more nuanced issue than the sexual abuse of children. Sexual involvement of an adult with a child is always wrong because we know that children are not developmentally able to give consent. Because adults always have authority over children, children cannot "just say no" to adults.

When the sexual offense occurs between adults, however, we assume that if there is no physical coercion, the relationship is consensual. In fact, however, when persons in positions of power — counselors, pastors, physicians — attempt to engage in sexual relationships with those over whom they have authority, the relationship is not consensual. The feelings or willingness of the victim are irrelevant; the act is legally defined as abuse because of the authority the professional holds.

Most of the stories I heard in my interviews sound much like the story Vanessa Bulls told in court last week. Matt Baker offered her the professional service of counseling in order to pursue his own sexual agenda. The woman, caught off guard by her trust in a "man of God" and told that God wants her to be in this relationship, is victimized. In her

testimony last week, Bulls said Baker was "wearing the mask of God" in order to engage her in a sexual relationship.

From the victims I have interviewed, I learned that if victims do break the silence in order to report a religious leader's misconduct, they often are ostracized by the church and blamed for causing a good leader to fall. The stories of victims are hard to hear; members of the congregation do not want to believe that their beloved leader could do such a thing. When I talk about this research, I have often been asked, "But don't you think women go after pastors?"

It is a good question, and a reasonable one. Yes, surely some women may be attracted to kind, thoughtful, caring religious leaders who listen to their life struggles. Perhaps some even seek a sexual relationship with a religious leader. But that is not the point, no more than it would be if a client in therapy "went after" her counselor.

Especially when religious leaders are confronted with temptation or seduction, it is the responsibility of that leader to hold the line. They must model how to care for others. They should never take advantage of another's neediness or vulnerability. That's why clergy sexual misconduct is illegal in Texas, and it should be illegal everywhere. The point is that clergy sexual misconduct is a breach of the community's trust in a leader.

When a religious leader abuses the power a community gives him, it damages the whole community. It was devastating for a congregation who trusted this man to lead them and who will probably never trust another leader in quite the same way.

The larger community trusted him; when Matt Baker told the authorities that his wife committed suicide, they believed him and conducted no autopsy. Families all across our community are trying to understand how this could have happened.

As a community, we need to take seriously that we all need accountability structures and guidelines, both for ourselves and for those to whom we give power. We cannot undo what happened to Kari Baker, but we can learn from it to create guidelines and accountability structures in our congregations. As we found in the focus groups we held, it is a structure many pastors would welcome — for the safe-keeping and well-being of all involved.

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