After Clergy Sexual Misconduct:

A Process for Congregational Healing

A Guide for Conference and Congregational Leaders

Bonnie Glass MacDonald, 2006

Introduction

When a pastor (or someone in a pastoral role) violates the sacred trust of the pastoral role through a sexual relationship with someone in the congregation, this act creates tremendous repercussions and has painful, lasting impact. Those involved are likely to experience trauma, anger, hurt, betrayal, loss of faith, and loss of relationships. Over time, the church as a whole has come to better understand the complicated nature of clergy sexual misconduct and to take this betrayal seriously. As a result, our policies and practices are now designed to support those most directly victimized and to hold accountable those who are responsible. In the focus on individuals, though, the congregation as a whole can sometimes be forgotten. The congregation is made up of individuals and families who deal with parallel issues of loss and betrayal, even if their relating to the pastor was only peripheral. The congregation is left to resolve these issues in its day-to-day life as it attempts to respond faithfully to both perpetrator and victim, while maintaining some sense of vision and mission. This is no small task.

Congregations need help in recovering from the trauma of misconduct and in moving into healing and healthy patterns of congregational life. In situations of crisis or misconduct, congregations often feel embarrassed and want to put the crisis behind them as soon as possible. But experience has shown that ignoring the intense feelings that naturally occur after such a violation will cause more trouble in the long run. Congregations that have experienced professional ministerial misconduct frequently have similar stories to tell of ongoing conflict over a variety of issues, factions that develop within the congregation, continual pastoral and other staff transitions, diminished energy and focus, and member loss. It is not uncommon for such congregations to experience a repeat episode of ministerial misconduct of some sort, and many also discover or admit to similar ethical violations in their past. Such congregations may develop a reputation for contributing to the burn out of the clergy who follow the one who has offended. It is not uncommon for congregations to continue to cope with the consequences of the crisis for years afterward.

The following process for congregational healing is based on the foundational belief that congregations have a unique need for healing and restoration in the wake of this harm. Each congregation must be helped to deal openly with the misconduct and its impact on the congregation as a whole (and individuals within), in light of its own unique context and history. Congregational "response teams" are sometimes created by conferences because congregations benefit from long-term support from those who have been trained to assist them in healing.

An essential part of this congregational healing process is telling the truth about what has happened. Confidentiality is maintained to protect fair process and to avoid additional harm to victims; but basic facts are shared so that the congregation has the information it needs to assess the situation and to take steps to move ahead in ministry. The sharing of basic information breaks through the human tendency toward secrets and rumors, and equips people with knowledge and understanding they need to face what has happened and prevent it from happening again.

What follows is a recommended model for facilitating a process of response and healing in a congregation dealing with the accusation of clergy sexual misconduct by its pastor or a clergy person on staff. The Bishop, the District Superintendent, and representatives of the Conference Response Team (CRT), all working closely as a larger team, facilitate this process. It is recommended that the CRT be involved from the beginning, so that the congregation understands its role as part of the healing process.

This process begins with church leaders and staff, and then broadens to include the whole congregation. Information shared at each step is determined by whether the complaint has been resolved; however, at each step, the congregation can be made aware of the procedures that are followed in any situation of complaint and when they can expect next steps to be taken. When the congregation can be helped to understand the complaint process, to have opportunity for asking questions and to share emotional responses, the trauma of clergy misconduct can be lessened and navigated with some hope for healing and learning.

Meeting with Church Leaders

After a written complaint of sexual misconduct has been made against a clergy person appointed to a local church, the Bishop and/or District Superintendent will then meet with the Staff/Parish Relations Committee (SPRC). This meeting should take place as quickly as possible—preferably before the first Sunday after the clergyperson has been removed from the church as a consequence of the complaint. If at all possible, a member of the Conference Congregational Response Team should be present for this meeting.

Agenda for Staff/Parish Relations Committee Meeting:

1. State the nature of the complaint that has been made against the clergyperson. Basic information should be given without violating the disciplinary process or guidelines from the Conference Chancellor.
2. Outline the disciplinary process, utilizing both the <u>Book of Discipline</u> and the Annual Conference Policy.
3. Describe the services and availability of the Conference Congregational Response Team (CRT), and the role of its members to support the complainant, the respondent, the respondent's family, and the congregation. Explain the overall model for congregational healing, including potential congregational meetings to help move through the grief and healing process.
4. CRT facilitators lead the SPRC through a process of debriefing and reflection similar to what would happen in a congregational meeting, allowing them to better identify their own experience at this point in time and understand how others in the congregation may be feeling. The CRT may briefly explain what the leaders might expect regarding congregational response and dynamics in the near future. This would include explanation of typical grief process: denial, anger, sadness, etc. Depending on the size of the congregation, it may be appropriate and helpful to identify a team of people with skills to act as a congregational healing team, to work in tandem with the CRT in planning the best steps for the congregation's process. Particular attention will need to be given to children and youth, who will need age appropriate help in processing information.
5. Plan next steps, including a congregational letter sharing basic information (if this has not already been done by the District Superintendent and congregational leadership) and a specific plan for next steps in congregational healing. The progress of the resolution of the complaint will determine how much information can be shared and the extent of healing work that can be done in the congregation at any given point (see "Congregational Meeting").

Meeting with Church Staff

It is important for the CRT to also meet with any staff of the church, using an agenda similar to that used for the SPRC meeting. This meeting is meant to be confidential as well; it is important for staff people to have a safe place to process their feelings openly and to ask questions. Appropriate room arrangements should be made so that confidentiality can be ensured. Staff in this situation experience individual and group dynamics similar to the SPRC and to the congregation, but with potential for increased trauma due to having worked with the person who has been accused. They may have experienced additional abuse of power, have had their own suspicions but felt unable to act on them, or may have felt close to the clergyperson and are now dealing with loss, grief and anger. Like the SPRC, the staff must deal with their own feelings while also acting as leaders and they will need help to do this well. Some may not be able to separate personal feelings from leadership responsibilities and the SPRC and CRT will need to monitor and guide staff if this is a concern.

Staff people will need to know specifically how they are to respond to questions and what information is to be kept confidential. They will need the same information as the SPRC regarding the disciplinary process and what to expect in terms of how open responsibilities are to be covered, including when they can expect resolution.

The Letter to the Congregation

A letter should be sent to church members preceding the first Sunday of the clergyperson's absence, or as soon as possible thereafter. This letter should come from the Bishop, or the District Superintendent on behalf of the Bishop.

The purpose of this letter is:

- to state clearly the status of the clergyperson involved:
  …has been suspended pending investigation of allegations of clergy sexual misconduct.
  …has surrendered credentials as an ordained minister and has been relieved of duties as your pastor.

- **If the complaint has been resolved**, to explain what has happened through a basic, truthful statement, with unambiguous language about the nature of the misconduct:
  …has engaged in a sexual relationship with an adult female (or females)…
  …has sexually abused a child (children)…

- to assure the congregation that this concern is being attended to faithfully:
  …I am in continuing contact with our Bishop, who is prayerfully considering the best course of action for future pastoral leadership for your congregation.
  …I will be working closely with your Staff/Parish Relations Committee to make sure that the spiritual life of the church is being cared for.

- to give information regarding how pastoral duties will be continued in the pastor's absence, to the extent that this is known at this time:
  …pastoral duties will be carried out in the interim by…

- to inform members of any planned congregational meetings;

- and to explain briefly the services of the CRT:
  …The services of the Conference Response Team, trained to help congregations in healing and recovery, will be available to the congregation as needed in the days and months ahead.

Sample excerpts from letters to the congregation

...This is a difficult letter to write and I know that it will be a difficult letter for you to receive. However, the grace of God that has been sufficient in the past will sustain us in this hour and in the days ahead.

Being part of the faith community offers many benefits. One of those benefits is that when we become an encouragement and support to others, at the same time, we receive encouragement and support. This is God's good gift to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. The new life and physical growth that your church is currently experiencing brings you to a greater sense of community.

You will need to call upon this wonderful faith community as you face a challenging situation.

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I know that many of you have experienced God's grace in beautiful ways through (pastor's) preaching, pastoral care, and leadership. I encourage you to join me in praying that (he) will experience that grace anew in (his) own life…

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I ask you to join me in praying for the healing of those who have been harmed and in asking God's guidance as we express our concern for them as a community of faith.

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The prayers and support of your Bishop and the District Superintendents of the Annual Conference are with you…May God guide and sustain us in the coming weeks and months.

These excerpts are taken, with appreciation, from letters written by Dr. Debbie Wallace-Padgett and Rev. Randy Coy.

The Sunday Presence of the Bishop and/or District Superintendent

On the first Sunday following the meetings with the SPRC, staff, and other church leaders, the Bishop and/or District Superintendent should be present in Sunday worship services. A member of the Conference Response Team (CRT) may be present as well. Depending on the situation, it may be desirable for those who are present on behalf of the Conference to lead in worship. It is important for this service to be a time of worship; the explanation of what has happened should take place after the service.

At the close of the service, the District Superintendent or Bishop can inform the congregation that a brief congregational meeting will take place immediately following. It should be noted that this meeting will involve issues of an adult nature and childcare should be made available (and noted) for those who desire it. Further discussion for children and youth will be facilitated later within age appropriate settings and with age appropriate information.

The purpose of this meeting is to explain the current situation in much the same way that the congregational letter does. In fact, it is recommended that the letter be read to those present, so that information is shared consistently, along with an opportunity for questions related to what has been shared. In this brief meeting, the District Superintendent or Bishop makes the basic statement about what has happened, including the following information:

- the nature of the charges or complaint in specific terms so that the congregation clearly understands what has happened;

  …a complaint has been filed alleging sexual misconduct…
  …sexual relationship with an adult woman…
  …sexual abuse of a child…

- an overview of the disciplinary process can be given;

  ...has been suspended pending resolution of the complaint..
  …has surrendered ministerial credentials…

- the plan for ensuring that pastoral needs will be cared for during this transition period, along with the assurance that the congregation will be consulted regarding long-term pastoral plans;

- shared concern for complainant(s) (not named), the congregation, and the clergy person & clergy family;

- an introduction of those present from the Conference Congregational Response Team (CRT) and a brief explanation of the role of the team in relation to the congregation;

- the schedule for congregational meetings, including plans for processing with children and youth.

The opportunity can be given to ask questions related to what has been shared. The role of the Bishop or District Superintendent is to provide information regarding the disciplinary process and ongoing congregational functioning. The CRT representative is attentive to the healing process of the congregation, particularly with regard to feelings and education. **It is important that the questions during this initial meeting be limited** to the basic information known at this point, and that further discussion be referred to the scheduled congregational meetings. Most present will still be in the "shock" stage and will need time to absorb information and reflect on it. The congregational meeting will be a more appropriate time to further process feelings and information.

The Congregational Meeting

A congregational meeting should be scheduled to take place promptly after the complaint has been resolved. This meeting should be well publicized and ideally scheduled at a time that allows for a minimum of 3 hours, possibly a Saturday or a Sunday. Experience has shown that the congregational meeting can be adapted to a variety of time frames and settings; however, the model described below is still recommended as the "best practices" model for long term healing. The meeting is designed for adults; separate arrangements should be made for meeting with youth and children. Announcements should make clear that those attending should plan to stay for the entire meeting. A light meal could be served. Childcare should be offered. The Bishop or the District Superintendent may be present, but **the CRT members will facilitate this meeting**. The meeting will include the following components: sharing basic information about what has happened (without further harming those who have been hurt); sharing & validation of feelings; education about issues involved; spiritual reflection; and answering the question, "Where do we go from here?"

Within larger groups, in order to facilitate sharing in small groups, a number of group facilitators will be identified, with help from the SPRC or staff, and will be trained just prior to the meeting. These facilitators will help each group observe basic guidelines for the safe sharing of feelings, careful listening without judgment, confidentiality, and appropriate boundaries.

Congregational Meeting Agenda

1) Opening:

a) Brief spiritual reflection time, stressing God's presence within this congregation, even in the midst of trauma and uncertainty.

b) Introductions of judicatory leaders and CRT members, led by a church leader.

2) Review of facts and education:

a) Explanation of the basic facts of the situation, including the process followed, and expressing concern for those involved. This is done with attention to the disciplinary guidelines and advice of Conference Chancellor.

b) A time of education about the dynamics of clergy sexual misconduct may be helpful, within the context of this particular situation. Most congregations need help in understanding the power dynamics involved in misconduct and the responsibility of the clergy person to maintain professional boundaries. A further explanation of the role of the CRT may be appropriate regarding its ongoing contact with the congregation.

3) **Expression of feelings:** In small groups (around tables if possible) the trained facilitators lead in a structured process of sharing feelings and spiritual reflection.

4) **Spiritual reflection:** In small groups, participants are helped to reflect on the spiritual and theological impact of what has happened: What questions about God has this raised for me? Where might God be acting in this? How do we care for all involved and who is particularly vulnerable in this situation? What might God be calling our congregation to do in response?

5) **Closing discussion:** Where do we go from here? What else do we need for healing to take place? Any additional questions may be addressed, including the plan for continued pastoral leadership, and process for replacing the clergy person.

Additional congregational meetings or small group meetings will probably be needed. Leaders, staff, and certain members may need additional processing and help with healing over several months. There may also be particular groups within the congregation that need continued attention and support over the long term. Particular support needs to be given to those who had close connection with the clergy person involved and his or her family, such as the youth or children, the spouse's Sunday school class, and other groups that might be more intensely impacted. The CRT will remain in conversation with congregational leadership to determine what ongoing follow-up might be helpful.

> The bottom line is that all people need to talk about their traumatic experiences and integrate these experiences into their understanding of themselves and of life in general. When people have the opportunity to discuss, share, and compare experiences, the trauma loses its dominance over their consciousness and begins to diffuse into their understanding of themselves and their world.
>
> K. Johnson, as quoted in Congregational Trauma: Caring, Coping, and Learning by Jill Hudson.

This model is based on the model recommended by Nancy Myer Hopkins in *Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995).

Helping Children and Youth to Heal

The children and youth within the congregation need the same opportunity as adults to absorb, process, and heal from the experience of clergy sexual misconduct. They need to be told the basics of the situation in age appropriate terms, and allowed to ask questions. In the process of opening up discussion for children and youth, the congregation conveys its willingness to talk about these difficult matters and helps them to know that they are not alone in their confusion and their questions. This kind of discussion can happen in Sunday school, or in other regularly scheduled programming, and needs to be led by an adult they trust, who is also skilled in leading such conversations. A simplified version of the agenda that is used for the congregational meeting works with youth and children as well, as long as it is done in age appropriate terms. It is important to explain simply what has happened, who will be pastor to them now, and offer a chance for them to share feelings. It is also important to allow for questions and to respond truthfully. It may help to explain about what needs to be confidential in order to protect people from being hurt. If a child or youth has been directly affected (and this is known), it will be important to help other children and youth think about how they can be helpful to this person. If the victim is not known, they will need to reflect on less direct ways of being supportive, such as through prayer.

For the youngest children, a simple statement is most appropriate:

> *Each of us does things that are wrong and sometimes our parents give us consequences or take away privileges. Our pastor has done something wrong, and because of that he has to stop being a minister. God still loves him and will care for him, just like God loves us when we do something wrong. We can help by praying for the pastor, his family, and for the people he has hurt. We can be sad about what's happened, and we can still be thankful for the things we liked about our pastor.*

For older elementary children, the simple statement can be used, but with some additional information and encouragement to reach out to people who may be hurting, particularly the clergy family. For example:

> *Our pastor has had a relationship with a woman who was not his wife, and this has hurt a lot of people. Our congregation will try to show we care about everyone who has been hurt—the pastor's family, the woman involved, and the pastor. Even though he did something wrong, God still loves him, and it's okay for us to remember what we liked about our pastor. When any of us do something wrong it's important that we try to make it right. We can count on God to help us and our pastor through this.*

For youth, it is important to be truthful about what has happened and to allow for questions. It also is important to explain about the pastor's role in keeping people safe and free from harm.

> *Our pastor has had a sexual relationship with an adult woman from this congregation. It is important for people to be able to turn to a pastor for help when they are hurting without that relationship becoming sexual. It is wrong when this happens, whether the people involved are adults or children, and it's called "misconduct." Because of this behavior, our pastor is no longer going to be a pastor. It is a difficult time for him and his family and for the woman who has been hurt by this. We need to pray for all of them. We hope that he will do what he can to try to make this right and ask for forgiveness from God. God loves us all, even when we have done something wrong or have been hurt—nothing separates us from God's love. We need to pray for all who are hurting because of what's happened. God will help us get through this.*

Helpful Resources for Working with Congregations

Listed below are resources that contribute to a basic understanding of the complex dynamics of clergy sexual misconduct. Each district would benefit from making these resources available to its congregational leaders and its clergy.

Gaede, Beth Ann, editor. **When a Congregation Is Betrayed: Responding to Clergy Misconduct.** Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 2006.

This book is an essential "strategic survival manual" for leaders of congregations or judicatories, helping to make sense of all types of misconduct. Benefiting from an additional decade of experience, it draws on the expertise of its authors to tackle the question, "how can a congregation that has been betrayed heal?" How can it integrate the misconduct into its history, identity, and ongoing life? Its practical chapters address the many characters involved in this congregational drama, including afterpastors, judicatory leaders, attorneys, and lay leaders.

Gafke, Art and Lynn Scott, editors. **Living the Sacred Trust: Clergy Sexual Ethics. A Resource on Clergy Misconduct of a Sexual Nature for Cabinets and Boards of Ordained Ministry of the United Methodist Church**. Nashville, Tennessee: the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry; Division of Ordained Ministry—Section of Elders and Local Pastors.

This resource covers the essentials of dealing with clergy sexual misconduct from the perspective of the Cabinet and the Board of Ordained Ministry. It explores a wide range of practical and theoretical considerations, including healing processes for individuals, congregations, clergy, and clergy families and the policies and procedures needed for effective prevention and intervention.

Hudson, Jill. **Congregational Trauma: Caring, Coping & Learning**. Washington D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1998.

Jill Hudson helps explain the emotional processes that happen during periods of crisis and gives specific, helpful recommendations for responses that are effective and lead toward healing. Through case studies and reflection, she gives valuable insight into helping a congregation survive a trauma and thrive.

Poling, Nancy Werking, editor. **Victim to Survivor: Women Recovering from Clergy Sexual Abuse**. Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1999.

In this collection, six women share their personal stories of being sexually abused by clergy. Though the specifics of their stories are different, the basic patterns of the abuse are strikingly similar for each woman. In sharing their stories, these women help the rest of us to understand this abuse in a much deeper way.

How do you respond to the victim involved?

1. **Make contact.** It is essential that you express pastoral concern to whoever is at the receiving end of the sexualized behavior of the clergyperson. Obviously, if **a child is involved you must report it immediately.** If an adult is involved, you can respond pastorally as you would to anyone else who has been hurt emotionally, or who is going through a difficult time. You can reach out in person, by phone, and by letter. There will be situations in which the complaint has been filed by someone other than the victimized person. At times, an adult congregant might not perceive themselves as having been "victimized". It is not essential for them to fully appreciate the professional responsibilities of clergy for preserving boundaries for them to hear that the church cares for them. At some point in the future, it is likely that an adult will begin to realize how he or she has been harmed. When that happens, it will help to know that the church reached out earlier. When the church does not reach out, remains silent, ignores the victim or blames the victim, the hurtful repercussions of the misconduct multiply and may impact the congregation even more negatively. Even if an attorney has told the victim not to have contact with the church, that attorney cannot limit the church's responsibility to respond pastorally, letting the victim know that the church cares about her or him.

2. **Offer the services of the Conference Response Team.** Explain that there is a person on the team that will offer support to the victim and will help her understand the process as it progresses. The Conference also can offer the person counseling assistance as needed.

3. **Provide information promptly.** The victim has a right to be informed in a timely manner about what steps are being taken to address the misconduct and what is being shared with the congregation. The CRT support person can also help provide this kind of information.

4. **Pray for this person or people regularly.** Praying reminds us of this person's pain and vulnerability that has been abused, and helps us to remember our responsibility in caring for him or her. God's healing will be needed in the days, months, and years ahead.

▸ When confronting a clergyperson about sexual misconduct, remember:

- **An abusing clergyperson will almost always minimize, deny, or lie** when initially confronted about a complaint of misconduct.

- **Ask the accused person directly** about specific alleged behaviors. For example, "Did you have sexual intercourse with her?" When asked directly and specifically, some abusing ministers will admit the behaviors.

- **Watch for a pattern.** Pay attention to whether what has been alleged about the minister's behavior, the alleged incidents, and the situations of the victims are consistent with what we know about how such abuse happens. Multiple complaints about one minister also indicate a pattern of abuse.

- **Do not get hooked** if the accused asserts that he or she is being "victimized" by an investigation. The process of being called to account may be extremely painful for an abusing minister, but this is not victimization.

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"Recognition of sexual molestation in a child [or sexual abuse of an adult] is entirely dependent upon our willingness to entertain the possibility that the condition may exist."

Suzanne Sgori, M.D.

Adapted from the workshop manual *Clergy Misconduct: Sexual Abuse in the Ministerial Relationship* from the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, 1997, p.76. Used with permission of training agreement.

▸ What happens if a congregation does not go through an intentional process of healing after clergy sexual misconduct?

The congregation is likely to suffer significant impairment to its community in the months and years to come. It doesn't work to gloss over or sidestep the healing process. It will probably experience some or all of these symptoms, which may persist for years:

- Misdirected anger at church staff, at district or conference staff members, at "afterpastors" (those who follow an offender), and at lay leadership.
- Reactivity in the form of making unwise or hasty decisions.
- Ongoing divisions within the congregation.
- Depression and malaise; people unwilling to expend energy on the day-to-day life of the congregation.
- Excessive preoccupation with caring for the offending pastor (and pastor's family) with less regard for other injured parties.
- Loss of members/income which does not resolve in the usual "recovery period" (6-12 months) for these losses.
- A climate of anxiety, gossip and conjecture resulting from understandable attempts to find out "what happened"?
- Conscious or unconscious embarrassment, leading to isolation from the surrounding community and from other congregations.
- "Sexualization" of the congregation, in which undue attention is given to matters of human sexuality.
- Congregational conflicts which symbolize the pain; for example, conflicts about the priority of children's ministries, about job/role descriptions, about the external appearance of the church building, about the newsletter, about worship practices, about "boundaries" like keys to the building, office hours, outreach, etc.
- Nostalgia and mourning about times past (an earlier era long before this recent problem emerged) or the idealization of a previous pastor.
- Suspicion about new ideas, new programs, new forms of ministry.
- Despair about the future of the congregation; and the resulting fear of making commitments or taking risks.

Adapted from guidelines written by Episcopal Bishop Chilton Knudsen in an undated article.