Clergy Sexual Addiction: A Systemic Preventative Model

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Rather than looking at the personal antecedents of clergy sexual addiction, this article looks at the systemic and environmental factors that contribute to clergy sexual addiction with the purpose of formulating a preventative strategy. Five recommendations are made regarding prevention: (1) A need for professional educational education and openness; (2) an integration of the whole person with the role as pastor; (3) breaking isolation with accountability; (4) proactive denominational care for clergy; and (5) a proactive play of response for the clergy sex addict. An invitation for others models that stress environmental factors with a preventative posture is made.

Beginning with Patrick Carnes’ seminal work Don’t Call It Love (1991) a steady body of research and writing has accumulated with regards to the problem of sexual addiction. Conceptualization, assessment, psychological factors, neurochemical influences, and treatment of sexual addiction have all been widely written on and studied. The vast majority of the literature has concentrated on understanding sexual addiction largely from the perspective of assessing and treating sexual addiction from an individual perspective. Though Carnes (1991) has recognized the influence of culture on addiction, little attention has been paid in attempting to prevent sexual addiction by looking at the environmental factors that give rise to it. This article will explore the environmental factors that are linked with clergy sexual abuse and from this make recommendations as to how such factors could be mitigated by altering the systems that give rise to them.

No firm scientific base rates have been established for clergy sexual addiction, however it is fair to say that the numbers are significant. Carnes (1991) reported that 10% of those being treated as inpatients for sexual addiction were clergy. In a recent polling of their readers, Leadership (2002)
found that 21% of their clerical respondents have viewed pornography “a few times a year” while 6% have viewed it a couple of times a month or more. In an earlier poll Leadership (1988) reported that 24% of their respondents admitted to having sexual practices outside of marriage. Though clergy sexual addiction is not the same as clergy sexual malfeasance, the line that divides the two is not easily drawn for two reasons. First, sexual addiction can lead to clergy sexual malfeasance. Blanchard (1991) reported a minimum of 55% of sex offenders can be diagnosed as sexually addicted. Second, within the unique context of a religious setting, clergy sexual addiction by its very nature is experienced by the community of faith as “a betrayal of trust” (Grenz & Bell, 1995). Sexual addiction is not merely a problem for the individual and his or her family (and potential victims), it also affects the church as a whole. In a manner similar to how denominations and churches have moved forward in dealing with clergy sexual malfeasance, they also need to move in dealing with clergy sexual addiction.

In general, clergy sex addicts have the following characteristics as other sex addicts:

- They are victims of abuse (sexual, physical, emotional).
- They come from rigidly disengaged families.
- They see themselves as shameful, bad, unworthy persons.
- They are codependant and believe no one would love them as they are.
- They see sexual activity as the most important way of taking care of their emotional needs.
- They engage in a variety of sexual behaviors.

In addition to these characteristics, Laaser (1991) found that clergy sex addicts:

- hope that their ordination would reduce the shame they feel in their lives;
- are codependents, who seek approval from others, and get their needs met by gaining widespread approval by pleasing parishioners;
- are in significant denial. Because the consequences for clergy are profound when it comes to sexual indiscretion, denial becomes an even more significant problem;
- often have well entrenched rigid judgmental thinking that is buttressed by their theology; and
- often have a great deal of unexpressed anger.

In light of these findings, Laaser and Adams, (2002) concluded that sexually addicted pastors have unconsciously chosen their vocation to cover up childhood and trauma issues.

Yet beyond the individual variables involved, the environment and demands of the pastorate create a high-risk environment for sexual addiction to flourish. The relationship between a pastor and congregant is undefined
with none of the clear boundaries that exist in other helping professions. This often leads to role confusion, which is compounded by the fact that the job description of a pastor is typically implicit and ambiguous. Sexual addiction has been linked to high demand jobs with little structure or supervision (Carnes, Delmonico, & Griffin, 2001) which describes the reality of the pastorate. The job is ambiguous, leaving a great deal of discretionary time for clergy persons, who typically act in an autonomous manner with little direct supervision. Despite the fact that there is little accountability, there typically are high expectations put on the pastor by the congregation. Two of the most significant expectations include:

- The pastor is to be a “Godly” person, which often translates into what is commonly known as the “gold fish bowl” syndrome, where pastors feel like they are constantly under the scrutiny of the congregation to live an exemplary life. This often leaves pastors in a place where they feel they cannot truly be who they are. There is little room for them to express their own struggles, their own needs, or even their own humanity. They begin to become isolated and compartmentalize their lives. Sex can become a way of meeting their unmet emotional needs. Compounding the situation is the confusion that exists in many clerics over their own personal identity. For many pastors, their calling is not merely about what they do, it is about who they are. This confusion serves to weaken even further healthy identity structures needed to sustain the demands of ministry. When who you are becomes what you do, and what you do becomes being the man or woman of God, failure to meet this exceptionally idealistic standard can become a deep source of shame.

- The pastor is to be the caregiver. Like all caregivers, pastors find it easy to give care but difficult to receive care. This leads to the conditions of poor self-care, depletion, over extension, and stress, which have all been positively related to sexual addiction (Carnes, 1995). Exacerbating this, is the fact that care within religious settings is often defined in somewhat codependent terms where the pastor is expected to always be there for others (often in a rescuing role), always be nice, and never express anger. At times these expectations by some congregations are palatable, and even those with healthy personality structures have a hard time resisting the demand for codependence. The problem of codependence has been strongly linked to sexually addiction (Carnes, 1991, 2001).

In summary, the very work that clergy carry out inherently contains a number of factors that are associated with sexually addictive behavior. Exacerbating this problem even more is the fact that some faith communities are very rigid and shaming, especially when it comes to sex. Rigidity and sexual shame have been positively linked with the familial backgrounds of addicts. However, the ethos of the “family of God” also will impact clergy in understanding and dealing with their sexuality.
In light of these environment and systemic realities inherent in clerical work, I suggest a five-pronged approach that could be adopted by seminaries and denominations to help ameliorate the environment factors linked to clergy sexual addiction.

THE NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AND OPENNESS

A female clergy person summarized her experience of how she was treated by her church and denomination when they discovered her sexual addiction that resulted in an adulterous affair:

I was simply asked to take a leave of absence from ministry and all this was swept under the rug. There was the usual gossip and speculation, but for three years I heard nothing from my church or my clergy friends. Basically the message was: Go fix this.

She concludes by writing:

Hand-slapping, moralizing and ignoring may seem to be in order. They are in essence like correcting the grammar on your teenager’s suicide note (Anonymous, 1991, p. 266).

Despite the fact that this occurred over ten years ago, there is little indication to suggest that much has changed in most religious orders with regards to clergy sexual addiction. In the last decade there has been a growing body of literature that has dealt with clergy sexual malfeasance. Ethical issues (Fortune, 1989), investigation and assessment of the offender (Schoener, 1990, 1996; Davies, 1996), and dealing with the victims have all been extensively written on providing clergy, churches, and denominational leaders with a rich resource from which to draw. However, lagging behind is a concentrated body of literature that deals with the very real problem of clergy sexual addiction. Although the two are often related, lumping sexual addiction in the same category as sexual malfeasance is naive and unhelpful. Many clergy and denominational leaders are confused when it comes to understanding these two problems and though they are beginning to respond in responsible ways to malfeasance, they are not responding to the problem of sexual addiction.

In dealing with clergy sexual addiction the most popular solution seems to be keeping the problem as quiet and as invisible as possible. Many denominations are in denial and see it largely as a “Roman Catholic problem.” The problem with both silence and ignorance is that it actually feeds the very shame that fuels sexual addiction. Clergy addicts feel enormous shame over their behavior, precisely because of their position. They see themselves as abnormal, not realizing in fact how common their problem is. Simply creating an atmosphere within religious settings where it is permissible to talk
about these things helps break down the silence that feeds the shame. Until pastors become aware of or admit to the fact that a significant percentage of them struggle with sexual addiction, those that do will feel marginalized.

A critical part of creating openness is to be informed about the nature of sexual addiction. A survey of the current popular literature aimed at clergy persons is positive in the sense in that the problem of sexual addiction is being recognized in a tone that is more compassionate than condemning. However the solutions offered, while typically helpful, are nevertheless aimed at first order change. Sexual addiction is understood as a problem behavior that needs to be stopped. It is seen largely as a matter of individual choice, without a deep appreciation for the fact that the individual is out of control of his or her behavior (which is what makes it an addiction). Little credence is given to the understanding of what lies underneath the addiction. Rarely do the articles suggest that those struggling with sexual addiction need the help of a professional. Most of the popular literature suggests that confession, repentance, and accountability are sufficient strategies in overcoming the addiction.

Most denominations simply do not have the time, energy, or resources to mount their own education plan. However, professionals who have worked with sexual addiction are an invaluable resource to denominational leaders. They can offer their services, not only for individual clergy, but also as consultants and educators. Seminars and educational courses need to be aimed at denominational officials as well as seminaries. This top down and bottom up strategy is optimal for reaching and impacting clergy. To educate those entering ministry at the seminary level gives rise to a new generation of pastors who understand sexual addiction and who are used to talking about it. To educate the denominational officials is to aim at systemic change. Only when those in authority are willing to deal with clergy sexual addiction will it become safer for the parish clergy person to deal with the problem.

AN INTEGRATION OF THE WHOLE PERSON WITH THE ROLE AS PASTOR

Shame fuels sexual addiction. Shame essentially is a deep sense of worthlessness deriving from an inability to love and accept oneself as one is. For clergy, because of the context in which they work, as well as their own self-identity and value system, the shame they feel regarding sexual addiction is particularly keen. Shame is often born in families where performance counts for far more than personhood. Carnes (1991) found that 78% of all sex addicts come from rigid families that stress doing the right thing. Yet this very dynamic is mimicked within the “family of God.” From the moment the person enters seminary, the meta-communication is what really counts in ministry is performance rather than personhood—and part of one’s performance is to “do the right thing.”
In their survey of Association of Theological Schools (ATS) seminaries Friberg and Laaser (1998) included a question about how the school integrates spiritual life with sexual conduct. They reported that most seminaries did nothing along those lines and some did not even understand the question. In the 2003 annual meeting of ATS seminary presidents, at a plenary address, the president of a large southwestern seminary suggested that by and large theological education aims only at the “10% of the iceberg that is visible.” We do not look at what is going on below the surface in our students lives.” Most seminaries do teach on the importance of personhood, of knowing self, of spiritual formation, and of being connected to community, but beyond the teaching it is never actually modeled. Thus, the students learn, at least at an unconscious level, to compartmentalize their lives. Academic performance is a necessity, while personal vulnerability is an option. Long before the seminarian enters ministry, he or she begin to learn to play a role. Once in church this compartmentalization often becomes worse.

Friberg and Laaser (1998) found the following traits among seminary students who later were involved in clergy sexual misconduct:

- They had varying degrees of abuse in their personal history.
- They were arrested at various stages of psycho-sexual development.
- They had poor skills for intimacy, resulting in unsatisfactory relationships and no real friendships.
- They were to lead congregations but were unable to participate in the community themselves.
- They were externally focused on their role, status, power and connections with other people for a sense of their worth.
- They were not good at nurturing themselves physically, emotionally, or spiritually.
- They were extremely vulnerable to isolation, stress and serving the needs of their parishioners.
- They were led in the formal practice of religion but are unable to experience an internally healthy spiritual relationship with God personally.

What is tragic is that the majority of seminarians graduate without having anyone explore these issues in depth with them. Ironically it is in graduate school that individuals have their first encounter with sexual compulsivity (Carnes et al., 2001). Clergy sex addicts can participate in their religious orders at a functional level, but do not connect deeply with those they serve, and often have lost their own sense of connection with God. Sexual addiction is about escape. Therefore what must be done is help those in ministry connect with themselves, with others, and ultimately with God. In many seminaries there is a need for a greater emphasis placed on the individual as a person rather than merely a student. The focus must move towards dealing with issues of sexuality, spirituality, and psychology—not at an academic level, but at a personal one. Seminarians must be challenged to be open to
exploring who they are. They need to get used to the idea of looking at their lives and allowing others to do so. This is one of the ways to help break the shame, isolation and duplicity that feeds sexual addiction. The advantage of this emphasis is that it not only teaches ministry students healthy ways of dealing with their sexuality, but it also acts as a screen for those who have the potential to struggle with sexual addiction.

BREAKING ISOLATION WITH ACCOUNTABILITY

A key component of sexual addiction is isolation. Addicts firmly believe that if anyone knew them as they really are, they would not be loved. They therefore believe that they cannot meet their needs by depending on others. One of the highest correlates of pastors who are involved in sexual addiction is isolation. Pastors are not really known by anyone. Addicts find the idea of being truly known by others to be very threatening. One clergy sex addict, who had been forced into recovery after being discovered by his church, wrote about his feelings of having to share his story with others.

I hated being vulnerable, having the weak and wounded child, and the stuck, confused angry adolescent show. I believed so strongly that my existence, my very being was in jeopardy if anyone really knew me, that I could not risk that exposure (Anonymous, 1991, p. 261).

As already noted, the nature of ministry is such that it is easy for clergy to become emotionally isolated as well as unaccountable. The systems that allow this can and need to be changed. Isolation is simply too significant a problem to go unchecked. There are limits of what can be done, however, as the old saying goes, those who have nothing to hide, hide nothing. There needs to be a new ethos in seminaries and denominations where openness and accountability among clergy is actively facilitated and encouraged. Again, this expectation can be initiated in the seminary where students can be put in cohort groups that last throughout their studies. Using a CPE model, the time in their group should include an interpersonal relations time, where they “learn to get real with one another.” After graduation, clergy should likewise be put into an accountability group, or have the option of staying in one where they already feel comfortable. Critical to this type of approach is defined safeguards for both the individual and the judicatory body that governs him or her. Clergy often hesitate to tell their struggle to others (particularly those struggles of a sexual nature) for the very real fear of reprisal. However, on the other side, judicatory bodies need to feel the freedom to act when they feel that the professional impairment is too great to allow the pastor to continue active ministry. While this is a fine balancing act, trust can be established through openness and dialogue. The current situation in many denominations today is that if there is focus at all for clergy to be account-
able to others, it is more of a recommendation than an expectation. The more accountable and open clergy become the greater the potential to act in a preventative way of dealing with sexual addiction.

PROACTIVE DENOMINATIONAL CARE FOR CLERGY

Sexual addiction is an illegitimate form of self-care. Addicts often are involved in winning the approval of others by caring for them, indulge in codependent rescuing behavior, have poor boundaries, and do not know how to look after their own personal needs in legitimate ways (Carnes, 1991). The church is a place where these factors flourish. In fact they are often seen as a normative part of the job description. As one retired pastor’s wife commented to Mark Laaser after one of his presentations on codependence, “What you are calling co-dependency is what in the seminary we were taught as enabling, helping others” (Laaser, 1991, p. 224). Being in the role of the caregiver, clergy are at risk for letting their own needs to be unfulfilled, which puts them at risk to indulge in sexually addictive behavior (Blanchard, 1991).

The demands, stressors, and even traumas that are a part of clergy life have an accumulating effect so that even the most psychologically and spiritually healthy pastor can become burned out. Those who already have a predisposition towards codependency, unbounded caregiving rarely practice healthy forms of self-care. Though self-care is seen as a nice ideal, it is often perceived as an unattainable goal within the working reality of the ministry. The importance of self-care for healthy clergy functioning needs greater emphasis, both by the seminary and by the denomination. There is a double bind that happens for most seminarians and clergy—they are told that they need to take care of themselves, but sharing about how busy and stressed one is has become a subtle and insidious form of boasting. It is related to a distorted image of self-importance.

Some of the responsibility for self-care needs to shift from the individual to the denominational systems that he or she serves. Denominations and judicatory bodies need to be proactive about servicing their pastors to take some responsibility to be proactive in the way they care for clergy. Such shifts in the system will alleviate the double bind that many pastors feel about self-care. Helping to minimize or eliminate exhaustion, depletion, overextension, and stress is a significant step in building safeguards that protect clergy from a wide range of mental health issues, including sexual addiction. There are many strategies that can be implemented including:

- Retreats that focus on interpersonal issues of stress, or on building intimacy in the clergy home;
- proactive psychological intervention for pastors who have been involved in trauma;
- seminars and programs that help clergy deal with their unique stressors;
- Accessible and well-advertised bases of referral (including help for clergy struggling with sexual addiction); and
- “Soul care,” for clergy. Laaser and Adams (2002) believe that it is essential for all pastors to receive spiritual direction from a qualified mentor or by meeting in groups with other spiritual pilgrims.

A PROFESSIONAL PLAN OF INTERVENTION FOR THE CLERGY SEX ADDICT

Specifically with regards to sexual addiction, denominations need help in putting together a professional and responsible response. In many denominations the response to clergy sexual addiction has been a prescription of sexual anorexia, which works in the short term, but leads to relapse in the long term (Carnes, 2001). There is some inbuilt resistance among religious orders to understanding sexual struggles as an addiction. As Carnes has pointed out, “Important barriers exist to our acknowledging the signs of sex as an addiction. . . . Perhaps the most important remains our persistent view of sex as always a matter of self-control or choice” (1991, p. 29). The fear among many denominations is that in defining compulsive sexual behavior as an addiction, that it somehow excuses the individual from any responsibility for his or her actions. Yet all reputable addiction recovery treatment insists on personal responsibility; however treatment goes beyond that to recognize the true nature of addiction, and responds with strategies aimed not only at first order changes (quitting the behavior) but also second order change (changing the way one lives).

Regardless of the theological background, most faiths would not have a difficult time adopting the “gentle path” set out by Carnes, as it is does not pit psychological integration over and against religious beliefs or practices. In fact, spirituality is an essential component of the recovery process (Earle & Earle, 1995). Integration of the already existing spiritual resources with professional psychological intervention would maximize the benefits of an effective response.

Although putting together a response policy with regards to clergy sexual addiction does not seem preventative in nature, it is. First and foremost it helps denominations to not simply be reactive in dealing with the problem of clergy sexual addiction. They now have a strategy to guide them through the process. Second, it sends a message to the clergy and churches that this is a problem that is being taken seriously and being dealt with openly and honestly. Finally it allows both clergy and denominational leaders to work
together in stemming this very real problem. This engenders trust and goodwill, which again, allows for more openness and honesty regarding the problem.

CONCLUSION

Although there is widespread recognition of this problem, there is little will to deal with it. The current situation of declining church attendance and declining numbers of those entering ministry, has made survival needs the focus of most seminaries and denominations. Prevention of addiction is not usually a priority when the focus is on survival. Especially when prevention has to do with a topic that carries such emotional baggage as sexual addiction. For the most part seminaries and denominations do not have the time, resources, or expertise to deal in a constructive manner with a problem that left unaddressed continues to cause significant damage. Yet, for the most part, they recognize the need. One of the things that those who working with sexual addiction can do is to offer their services and expertise to religious organizations. This proactive stance can help form partnerships in which further strategies for prevention are worked. Whether the impetus comes from denominations, seminaries, churches, or experts in the field of sexual addiction, the potential for moving forward in these areas has great potential benefit. The recommendations made in this article as well as others can be implemented and over time, studied for efficacy. This could be the basis for developing a much-needed model with sexual addiction research—a model that focuses on prevention.

REFERENCES


