

Many Faiths

By Reverend Jeanne Torrence Finley

The windows through which the media have looked at clergy sexual abuse are not large enough. The issues are neither confined to a certain kind of clergy nor limited to the abuse of children. The issues of sexual abuse transcend lines of denomination and religion, include male and female congregants of all ages, and deserve the label of professional power abuse.

Catholic priests are not the only clergy who count offenders in their ranks. Jews, Protestants and others have faced the problem of sexual abuse by clergy and other religious leaders. Clear recent statistics are hard to come by, given the silence and secrecy that has surrounded this problem. A study in the 1980s indicated that a third of all clergy had engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior with a parishioner. The diversity of cases is not hard to document. No denomination or religion is immune.

Pedophilia is abhorrent, but shock and outrage over it should not obscure the fact that the victims of clergy sexual abuse may be either teens or adults, most of them female. Clergy sexual abuse includes all instances of clergy's engagement in sexual or romantic relationships with parishioners.

In "The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response" Cooper-White writes, "I have found that a majority of ministers who enter into romantic or sexual relationships with parishioners do so primarily because there is an imbalance of power between them at the onset, and because they need to reinforce and heighten the intensity of that power dynamic."

Using the label "affair" does not do justice to the betrayal of trust involved in a cleric's sexual involvement with a parishioner. The larger issue is professional power abuse.

In the context in which we clerics meet people, they are often vulnerable. They may be suffering sickness, loss of loved ones, job termination or some other crisis. When they come to us for a listening ear, guidance and referrals, our professional roles are not appropriate places to seek to fulfill our personal relational needs. Like therapists, teachers, lawyers and doctors, clergy are in positions of trust and service. Professional ethics require that we not use professional relationships for personal reasons and that we not violate the trust placed in us by those we serve.

Many mainline Protestant denominations have worked on sexual-abuse policies, procedure and education for more than a decade. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America published a resource titled "Safe Connections: What Parishioners Can Do to Understand and Prevent Clergy Sexual Abuse" by Erickson-Pearson. Many

denominations have used excellent resources from the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence in Seattle, such as Fortune's "Is Nothing Sacred?"

However, church officials in many instances are inexperienced in dealing with policies and procedures for filing complaints, carrying out investigations and attending to the healing of survivors and congregations. And many congregational leaders take the attitude that "it can't happen here."

Furthermore, there are independent congregations and other religious bodies that are either unwilling to tackle the issues of lack sufficient resources for creation of policy, accountability and enforcement.

Whatever critique may be justly leveled at judicatories and religious institutions for slowness in dealing with professional abuse, it is foolish to assume that people who opt for smaller or independent religious communities are safer than those who are members of more bureaucratic groups. The crisis over sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is a call to people of all faiths to act to ensure the safety of children and adults in their communities. All religious bodies need to have in place policies and procedures to address clergy misconduct and to educate laity and clergy in preventing sexual abuse.

Unless this crisis is placed in this larger framework, all denominations and religions will miss a chance to do justice.