

## Why It's Not An Affair

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The issue of sexual contact between clergy and congregants is complex. Whenever a minister is exposed for such behavior the aftermath is traumatic for everyone involved. Churches feel betrayed, victims/survivors are marginalized and misunderstood and the families of all involved suffer greatly.

Oftentimes sexual contact between clergy and congregants is dismissed as an "affair" between "consenting adults". This is a misnomer for several reasons. First, the relationship between a clergy person and his/her congregants is professional in nature. That means that clergy have a responsibility to use the special knowledge, skills and gifts of their call for the benefit of those they serve namely their congregants. It also means that clergy have a responsibility to establish healthy professional relationships. Because clergy carry moral and spiritual authority, as well as professional power it is ALWAYS their responsibility to maintain an appropriate professional boundary.

In practical terms this translates into clergy not pursuing or initiating sexual relationships with congregants (regardless of marital status of either party) and not responding to the sexual advances of congregants who may be interested in a relationship with their pastor. It also means that clergy will not engage in sexualized behavior with congregants. Sexualized behavior includes jokes, inappropriate touching, pornography, flirting, inappropriate gift giving, etc.

Since the ministerial relationship is professional in nature, it is inappropriate to call a sexual encounter an affair. Affair is a term used to describe a sexual liaison between peers, or equals. In addition, the term affair focuses attention on the sexual nature of the behavior rather than the professional violation. It also places equal responsibility for the behavior on the congregant. Since clergy have a responsibility to set and maintain appropriate boundaries, those who are violated by clergy's inappropriate sexual behavior are not to be blamed even if they initiated the contact.

This is a difficult concept for many people to grasp. We want to blame the congregant (usually but not always a woman) for the sexually inappropriate behavior of the minister (usually but not always a man). As tempting as this may be, it is wrong because it is always the responsibility of the minister to maintain the integrity of the ministerial relationship. The temptation to blame the congregant is also a reflection of the difficulty people have believing that a person who carries moral and spiritual authority, who is respected and trusted, can also be guilty of misusing the power and authority of the office. That denial and confusion causes tremendous damage to victims who need

understanding and support as well as to churches that need clear, ethical, theological and faith based intervention to understand their betrayal. Blaming the congregant also means a failure to call the abusing pastor to genuine accountability. The focus needs to remain on the violation of the ministerial relationship.

The term "consenting adults" also reflects a misunderstanding of sexual behavior between clergy and congregants. It is assumed that because two people are adults that there is consent. In reality, consent is far more complex. In order for two people to give authentic consent to sexual activity there must be equal power. Clergy have more power because of the moral and spiritual authority of the office of pastor. In addition, education, community respect and public image add to the imbalance of power between a clergy person and a congregant. Finally clergy may have the additional power of psychological resources, especially when a congregant seeks pastoral care in the midst of personal or spiritual crisis, life change, illness or death of a loved one. This precludes the possibility of meaningful consent between a congregant and their pastor.

In our work with survivors of clergy abuse we often ask the question, "Would this have happened if he/she was your neighbor and not your pastor." Overwhelmingly the answer is "no". The witness of survivors underscores the truth that the clergy role carries with it a power and authority that make meaningful consent impossible.

When speaking of sexual contact between clergy and congregants, the term professional misconduct or sexual exploitation is more accurate. It keeps the emphasis on the professional relationship and the exploitative nature of sexual behavior rather than placing blame on the victim/survivor. "An affair between consenting adults" is never an appropriate term to use when describing sexual contact between a minister and congregant. Accurate naming of the behavior is an important step to reshaping our thinking about this troubling reality in the church, how we name it reveals our belief about it. Holding clergy accountable with compassion and purpose and providing healing resources to churches and survivors is dependent on an accurate starting point. Only when we name the behavior accurately can we hope to have a healing outcome for all involved.