Pastoral Sexual Abuse

One Congregation's Ordeal

by Christine Hamilton-Pennell

As representatives of Grace Church, Nancy along with James, her minister, attended an out-of-state conference.[1] After a long day, James suggested an exchange of back rubs. Nancy agreed. While James was rubbing Nancy's back, she was shocked to realize that he was becoming sexually aroused. He began breathing heavily, climbed on top of her, and began massaging her breasts. She couldn't believe what was happening and pulled away in confusion. She had always thought of him as a father figure, particularly after he had counseled her through a difficult time after a friend's suicide. She avoided him for the rest of the conference, and on her return home she told her husband what had happened. He was very upset.

Nancy wondered whether she had misunderstood James' intentions or somehow given him the wrong signals, so she returned to the church to ask his impression of what had happened. He responded that it had been beautiful and he hoped it would happen again. Nancy told him she had been very upset by the incident. James said he hoped she would grow to understand the connection between spirituality and sexuality. He did not admit any wrongdoing or impropriety. Nancy resigned from her church commission and wrote a letter asking James for an apology. He did not apologize.

Nancy did not tell this story to the church leaders. She was afraid they would not believe her. The encounter seemed almost incestuous to her, and she engaged the help of a professional therapist in order to work through her feelings of confusion, guilt, and betrayal.

Marie M. Fortune, Executive Director of The Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence in Seattle, Washington, believes that the dynamics of incestuous abuse provide a model for understanding the dynamics and consequences of sexual contact by pastors and pastoral counselors. Incestuous abuse takes place within the intimacy of family relationships where there are pre-existing roles of parenting and nurturing. Younger children know that a parent or older sibling has authority over them. Fortune states:

> *Trust is central to the relationship. The responsible adult or older sibling should protect the vulnerability of the child and not misuse their role to the child's detriment. Specifically, this means that they do not engage in sexual activity with the child.... When this familial relationship is betrayed by incestuous abuse, the victim is often sworn to secrecy and the resulting isolation of the child can prevent assistance from other family members or persons outside the family. The secrecy may also contribute to the victim's tendency to blame her/himself for the sexual abuse. When the child does call for help by telling someone what is going on, she/he will not likely be believed.*[2]

In a pastoral relationship, particularly when counseling is involved, there is an imbalance of power, as in the parental relationship. The pastor retains the authority of his/her knowledge, training, leadership position, and personal gifts. The counselee is in a vulnerable position and must trust the counselor to protect his or her interests. When the pastoral counselor engages in sexual activity with a counselee, it is an abuse of pastoral authority and a betrayal of the client's trust. As in an incestuous relationship, there is an absence of meaningful consent to sexual activity which stems from the imbalance of power in the relationship.

A year later, Nancy mentioned this incident to her friend Julia. Julia had been a victim of sexual abuse as a teenager, and she recognized the signs. At a small church group meeting in a private home, Julia made a comment about James's impropriety, and Nancy reluctantly told her story. Julia said she believed James was sick and needed professional help. The group expressed shock and disbelief but decided to give this information to the deacons for discernment and action.

The deacons met with James, who admitted he had engaged in an inappropriate back rub and was sorry. The deacons encouraged him to apologize to Nancy, but instead he called her and angrily demanded an explanation for why she had shared the incident. Nancy felt betrayed by the deacons, who did not protect her from James's further abuse.

Over the next four months, a wider story of abuse unfolded slowly. At another meeting of the deacons, the small group, and James, Julia reported that two other women friends of hers had revealed that they had been sexually molested by James. She requested that James be asked to resign. Other members of the group seemed shocked by this suggestion and spoke about the need to "forgive and forget," and not to "cast the first stone." One of the deacons admitted that she had known about James's sexual encounters for ten years. James acknowledged these sexual encounters, but said he had apologized privately to the women involved. He was vague when asked about the specifics. After much discussion, and with many misgivings, the group decided the "allegations" should be brought to the congregation, which in their denomination has ultimate decision-making power.

Three weeks later, on the morning before the congregational meeting, James announced his resignation, effective in five months. He had been considering this move for some time, he explained. At the meeting, James apologized for "causing others hurt" and expressed great pain. His wife Edith acknowledged that

1. All names have been changed to protect those involved. This article is based on actual interviews with the women mentioned and official church documents.

2. All references to Marie Fortune are from her unpublished paper, "Betrayal of the Pastoral Relationship: Sexual Contact by Pastors and Pastoral Counselors," used with permission of the author.

she had suspected that James had been intimate with other women for some 12 years. Their marital difficulties were widely known at this time.

The details of Nancy's testimony were not disclosed at this meeting, nor was her identity disclosed to the larger group. To many it appeared that James had merely been guilty of an "inappropriate back rub." Many at the meeting seemed confused by the strong stance taken by some that James should resign. One woman said the whole process was disgusting and walked out. It seemed to many that the goal of the process should be to bring about reconciliation between the pastor and the women he had wronged. The women concerned were urged to bring complaints privately to James. Anger was expressed at the lack of visibility of the "alleged" victims.

Publicly, James had appeared to be remorseful about his inappropriate sexual behavior. In private conversations with several women, however, James showed that he was not repentant.[3] He was angry with the women who had exposed him. He said the women had "wanted" the sexual contact, and that any subsequent problems they had experienced were the result of previous psychological problems. He seemed more interested in justifying himself than exploring the roots of his behavior. More significantly, incidents of inappropriate physical contact continued even after the disclosures.

At a second congregational meeting, which James did not attend, a second woman, Wilma, revealed that she also had been subjected to inappropriate sexual behavior by James ten years previously. She shared the difficulty she had experienced in trying to resolve the emotional conflicts resulting from James's taking advantage of her vulnerability when she had sought counseling. She concluded by stating that his problem was serious and that he needed help. For many of those at the meeting, the presence of a visible witness helped them understand for the first time that sexual abuse had taken place.

3. Lenore Walker, in *The Battered Woman Syndrome* (New York: Springer, 1984), reports that there is often a "honeymoon" period of easy apology after an incident of spouse abuse. The offender expresses true remorse, but it is not followed by a change of behavior, and the cycle repeats itself. Some experts feel there is a parallel with other forms of incest and sexual violence.

The pastor's abuse became an issue for the whole congregation.

Two decisions were made. One was to provide a short-term therapy group for those people in the congregation who needed more professional help as a result of these incidents. The second decision was to accept James's resignation, effective immediately, with full salary and benefits continuing for four months. During those four months, James's role would be determined by the church council. Arrangements were made for an interim pastor.

At this point, many still believed James's presence was an important part of the healing process for the church. During the next several weeks, when James continued to use his office at the church, to answer the telephone, and to sit in his usual place in the congregation, it became apparent that his presence was a source of anxiety and pain rather than healing.

At the next congregational meeting, two months after Nancy first shared her story, the decision was finally made to ask James to vacate his office. There were still members of the congregation who defended James and felt the church was being "un-Christian" by not seeking reconciliation and forgiveness. But for most of the church's members it had become apparent that this pattern of sexual abuse needed therapeutic intervention as well.

Additional women continued to find the courage to speak of their own sexual abuse. Three months after the initial disclosure, Frieda shared her story with the congregation. "I don't think guilt is helpful," she began, "but I do think looking at what has happened and naming it is." She proceeded to tell how she had gone to James for counseling at a particularly difficult time in her life. She continued:

> *Over the following weeks and years the sexual involvement happened so slowly that I didn't realize what was happening. I believed James when he said, "God wants this"; "It is Spirit led"; "God made us to need each other"; "This is God's love for you." I no longer trusted myself or my instincts. I became dependent on James. I thought I owed James much and became a co-conspirator in an addiction.*
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> *Over a seven-year period, activity ranged from holding, touching, massage of the breasts and genitals, oral gratification, and orgasm on James's part. It stopped at the point where I might get pregnant. I was told not to tell anyone because "some people have hang-ups and wouldn't understand."*
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> *Speaking about it feels as if I'm breaking a trust. I am embarrassed by what has happened and my participation in it.*

Frieda's remarks illustrate the earlier point that sexual contact by a pastoral counselor is a betrayal of the pastor's responsibility to protect the vulnerability of the counselee. James abused his power by meeting his own needs at Frieda's expense, and he violated her trust by encouraging her to believe she "needed"—and God condoned—his sexual attention.

The disclosure of James' sexual abuse has been traumatic to the congregation of Grace Church. Though the abuse was perpetrated by the minister, it became an issue for the whole congregation. People became responsible for James's actions, whether they wanted to or not. Initially, many members tended to support James and blame the victims for what had happened. The victims were thus doubly wounded, as the community they had trusted did not support them. As bonds of trust were torn, people became estranged from each other, and rumors abounded.

Each person reacted to disclosures of James's sexual abuse out of their own experience and values. Julia, previously abused as a teenager, saw clearly that James had a destructive addiction over which he had no control and which required immediate intervention. One of the deacons felt that if she repeatedly confronted James about his behavior, he would change, even though he had indicated no interest in changing. One man felt there was no need to treat this "sin" differently from other sins; since James had apologized, he should be reinstated as long as he promised not to do it again.

Collectively, the congregation took several steps to assist healing. Two adult Sunday School classes were formed to explore in greater depth issues of sexual violence and forgiveness. The deacons met with their district conference minister to explain recent events and request assistance from the conference in assuring the safety of other potential victims. A committee was formed to examine the church's decision-making process, the accountability of pastors and counselors, and the role of the deacons. Lenten groups processed the collective loss people experienced and explored connections between grieving and birthing. A weekend workshop of sexual victimization, survival, and forgiveness, was led by the therapists who had led the earlier therapy group. Materials on sexual abuse were added to the church library.

Making justice involved requiring accountability of the offender.

The collective perception on this issue has gradually evolved, but it is not a situation that is ever "resolved." Some women abused by James are no longer a

part of the congregation. Some members of the congregation are still finding a voice to speak out and share their guilt and pain. There are still those in the larger church community who feel James has been treated unfairly. James himself is in the process of divorcing Edith. He attends a church of the same denomination in a neighboring town, pastored by one of his friends. Edith left to finish her education in another town when it became apparent that James was not interested in maintaining the marriage. Julia has stopped attending the church. Nancy has left the church and feels Christianity has little to offer her. She had experienced the church as unsupportive of her when she felt most powerless. For Wilma, the experience of caring for people through this ordeal has brought her *back* to the church after a period of absence.

Marie Fortune states, "The primary goal of a response to sexual contact by a pastor or pastoral counselor in a professional, pastoral relationship is to make justice in the midst of injustice.... We must act fairly and also decisively if we are to restore the integrity of the ministry and of the church." Making justice involves addressing the needs of individual victims as well as the divisions within the Body of Christ. It means requiring accountability of the offender. Fortune cautions against premature reconciliation with the offender. "Premature reconciliation at the encouragement of the congregation or denomination prior to repentance or restitution undercuts the process of seeking justice and eventually prevents authentic restoration for all persons in the situation."

Grace Church, in its stumbling, human way, has attempted to make justice for the victims, and to assure that the offending behavior will not be repeated. Members of the congregation are gradually accepting the fact that they have no control over whether James will express true repentance and be willing to do the necessary work to change his behavior. They have begun to focus on healing their own wounds and working to rebuild the bonds of trust between them. Regardless of whether reconciliation between James and Grace Church occurs, the women who have been victimized, like Frieda, Wilma, and Nancy, have been able to name their abuse and thus empower themselves to break the cycle.

Resources

Fortune, Marie Marshall, "Betrayal of the Pastoral Relationship: Sexual Contact by Pastors and Pastoral Counselors." Unpublished paper available from The Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, 1914 N. 34th St., Suite 105, Seattle, WA 98103. (206) 634-1903.

Fortune, Marie Marshall, *Sexual Violence, the Unmentionable Sin: An Ethical and Pastoral Perspective.* New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983.

Naming the Unnamed: Sexual Harassment in the Church. Available from the Council on Women and the Church, 475 Riverside Dr., Room 1151, New York, NY 10115 for $2.50. Bulk rates available. A 17-minute filmstrip with the same title can be ordered from the same office for $15.00. It presents a variety of situations in which sexual harassment occurs.

Sharing: Information by Women Clergy/Seminarians, newsletter of the Office of Women and Ministry of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The January 1987 issue includes an article on sexual harassment by clergymen. Write: *Sharing*, 475 Riverside Dr., Room 406, New York, NY 10115.

Washington Association of Churches, "Sexual Contact by Pastors and Pastoral Counselors in Professional Relationships: A Study with Recommendations to Denominational Judicatories." Available from WAC, 4759 15th Ave. NE, Seattle, WA 98105, for $1.25.

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