

# **Why Adult Victims of Clergy Sexual Abuse Are *Not* to Blame**

## **By Mark Scheffers, MDiv, LMSW**

If your pastor sexually abused you after you had become an adult you may ask, “How can it be that I’m not partly to blame? I was an adult after all. Didn’t I keep it a secret?” Maybe you were married and you lament, “I broke my marriage vows.” The evidence seems conclusive: The pastor can’t be the only one who did wrong.

But that conclusion ignores the circumstances. Just as a driver is not prosecuted for running a red light to get his pregnant wife to the hospital, your behavior must be considered against the background of how you were being abused. There are at least six reasons why you are not to blame for what happened to you.

### **1. You had a right to expect your abuser would honor his professional contract.**

Your pastor seemed like a friend. Like good friends, good pastors show interest, care, support, and encouragement for their parishioners.

But every pastor is more than a friend to his congregation members and community. After all, your pastor was paid to relate to you in a caring way. He<sup>1</sup> was under a professional contract to provide attention and support to you and other members of the congregation. Whether his contract was written or not, your pastor was employed by the church with the understanding that he would use his skills and training to benefit members of the church community.

When your pastor initiated sexual contact with you he broke that contract. You were not responsible for knowing what kind of behavior was or was not called for in his contract. It was his contract not yours. Taking advantage of you sexually (even if you approached him sexually) was never part of that contract. You had a right to expect he would honor the boundaries inherent in his professional contract.

### **2. Your idealization of your pastor was normal.**

You may blame yourself for misjudging the character of your pastor. “How could I have thought he was so wise and wonderful? Why didn’t I see what a jerk he is?” Idealizing a person in authority is normal. Children idealize their parents; students idealize their teachers; parishioners idealize their pastors. When we idealize someone we hope that we will receive the care we need from that person. We also hope that we will in some ways become like the person we idealize. A student idealizes his teacher because the teacher helps him learn. He spends the rest of his life living out the qualities he saw in her. Church members idealize their pastors in the hope that they will receive something they need from God through their pastor.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the masculine noun here because presently a larger percentage of pastors are male. Research indicates that 10-12 percent of pastors have engaged in sexual acts with parishioners. 25-35 percent acknowledge sexually inappropriate behavior with parishioners. Cf. Joe E. Trull & James E. Carter, *Ministerial Ethics: Being a Good Minister In A Not-So-Good World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 81.

They also hope that they will become what they imagine the pastor to be. Without idealizing others we don't become more than we are today.

You are not to blame for thinking highly of your pastor. Idealizing him was normal. He is responsible for failing to live up to even the most minimum requirements of pastoral integrity.

### **3. Your abuser's grooming was incremental and entrapping.**

When you look back to the period when you were abused, you probably feel aghast about how far things went before they finally stopped. "How could I have let it go so far?"

The answer lies in the tactics your abuser used to entrap you. If he had told you upfront what he intended to do, chances are you would have escaped. But your abuser was not that honest. Rather than offering you a choice, he proceeded to groom you in a way that was incremental and entrapping. He began tentatively and ambiguously. He may have given you a hug that pressed lightly on a private place. You noticed what he had done but didn't know what to make of it. Thinking the best of him, you assumed the gesture was a mistake or just your imagination.

Already at the beginning your abuser's gesture accomplished two things. First, the way he touched you increased your body's production of an attachment hormone, Oxytocin (see below). After the touch, you found yourself thinking of him more than you had before. Second, his first touch or comment prepared the way for his next more intrusive gesture. After he has touched you in a bolder way the second time, you said to yourself, "If I didn't want him to do this, why didn't I say so at the beginning?" If you tell someone, they will ask, "Why didn't you object when it began?" If you tell your abuser you don't want it, he will say, "You must have wanted it or you would have said no."

Since he groomed you incrementally, he gradually trapped you. You are not to blame for being trapped.

### **4. Your attachment to your pastor was normal. His intensification of that attachment was not.**

Members of a congregation benefit more from their pastor's ministry after they have formed an attachment to him. Attachment describes the emotional connection a person feels for the person who cares for her.

Our first attachments are to our parents. By attaching ourselves to them—and others later in life—we gain comfort, safety and security. Because we know they will always be there for us, we venture out and try things we haven't done before. If what we try doesn't work out, we can return to them to find comfort and reassurance.

As adults, many of our attachments are *reciprocal*. A husband and wife, for example, provide comfort and security to each other.

The pastoral relationship (and other helping relationships) is **not** reciprocal. Like our parents, professionals provide comfort and security to congregation members but cannot legitimately expect the same comfort and security from those they serve. This does not mean that we treat pastors with callousness or incivility. We owe them the common courtesy due all persons.

Still, a church member's responsibility for the pastor differs from the pastor's responsibility for the parishioner. The pastor is employed to provide care for the parishioner; the parishioner is not paid to provide care for the pastor. In the pastor-parishioner relationship, the pastor assumes the caregiver's role while the parishioner forms an attachment to the caregiver.

When your pastor began to abuse you, he used sexual language and touching to intensify your natural feelings of attachment to him. You may feel confused by the powerful effect his words and touching had on you. Victims often describe the effect of their abuser's pursuit by saying, "It was like I'd been drugged." In a sense you were. Recent research has shown how attachment prompted by sexual interchange triggers extraordinary levels of a hormone called Oxytocin.<sup>2</sup>

Once excessive amounts of Oxytocin are produced a person experiences a variety of effects. First, Oxytocin triggers a firm bond or allegiance to the person whose words and touching prompt the production of the hormone. This explains why persons who engage in a one-night stand find later that they continue to feel an attachment to the person they had sex with. Second, Oxytocin suppresses one's ordinary sense of wariness or danger. The hormone makes us set aside precautions we would ordinarily take. Finally, Oxytocin creates a sense of euphoria similar to that described by those who snort coke. The effects of Oxytocin serve well in binding us to a mate. Once we have acquired a mate, most of us do not find ourselves in relationships where the hormone is reactivated to the degree described here.

Using the access he had to you as your pastor, your abuser induced a heightened sense of attachment and behavior characteristic of a person madly in love or who had been drugged. Your abuser is like the person who drops Ecstasy into his date's drink at a party and then takes advantage of her. Like people who have been drugged, victims of sexual abuse are not to be blamed.

## **5. Your abuser controlled the relationship.**

Every professional assumes power over those who come to him for help. Because you trust your doctor as an expert on medical affairs, what she decides may affect how much pain you experience or how quickly you recover. The degree of power a pastor has in the lives of his parishioners exceeds the power other professionals in certain ways. A doctor, dentist, or a therapist, waits for you to come to her. A pastor, on the other hand, can call a parishioner and set up an appointment. Most professionals have you come to their office but the pastor may very well come to your office or home. If you don't show up for church on a Sunday morning, he might call or visit you on Monday. Yes, you can leave your pastor if you don't approve of him, but you will pay the price of losing connection to your friends and the church

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. "To Sniff At Danger", *The Boston Globe*, January 12, 2006. [www.theage.com.au/news/mind-matters/to-sniff-at-danger/2006/01/12/1136956247384.html](http://www.theage.com.au/news/mind-matters/to-sniff-at-danger/2006/01/12/1136956247384.html)

community. Your pastor wields knowledge, influence, voice, and visibility. No matter what position you might have held in the church, your power was less than the pastor's by virtue of his position.

Because the pastor has more control, what occurred between you and him cannot be consensual. Consent exists only where both parties have equal power. Although your abuser likely tried to make you share responsibility for what happened, you did not have the power to consent to it.

## **6. You are not to be blamed for being naïve and needy.**

Like many victims of abuse, you may blame yourself by saying, "I was so naïve and needy." Abusing pastors pass the blame for abuse onto their victims by talking about needy people as snares set for them. Such thinking is as reasonable as blaming a person for needing food or shelter. Rather than blaming people for their needs, society provides specialists—teachers, grocers, doctors, and pastors—to meet our legitimate needs.

You had a right to expect your pastor, as someone schooled to meet needs, would appropriately meet your needs or refer you to someone else who could. Even if your pastor had the capacity to do neither, you had a right to expect he wouldn't hurt you because you had needs. A pastor who abuses his parishioner is like the doctor whose patient has an infected appendix. When the doctor operates he leaves the infected appendix in the patient and damages the patient's heart. She is worse off after the surgery not because she's to blame for needing the surgery, but because of the doctor's incompetence. In the same way, your pastor is guilty of malpractice.

### **Before you blame yourself...**

Your self-blame may be so deep that reading six reasons not to blame yourself cannot silence your self-accusation. If so, remember that how we think about ourselves is not only a matter of what happens in our heads. Blaming yourself took shape amid your interactions with your abuser and other significant people in your life. Letting go of blame will develop as you interact with persons who appreciate and respect you. Relationships with those who are blaming reinforce self-blame; relationship with non-blaming people helps set aside self-blame. There is no quick fix to self-blame. But over time and in relationship with people who care for and honor you, you will find relief from unhealthy self-blame.

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