

## **“POWER AND VULNERABILITY IN MINISTERIAL RELATIONSHIPS”**

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As the church continues to face the crisis of sexual abuse in ministerial relationships, many voices can be heard offering different solutions and strategies. This article is intended to offer an overview of several key issues that inform the discussion of professional ethics in ministerial relationships.

As defined in this article, ministerial relationship refers to any position of leadership within a church or religious community. It includes ordained clergy, volunteer and paid staff, wardens, deacons, church school teachers, organists, choir directors, youth leaders and any other person whose role authorizes ministry under the auspices of the church. With the role comes power; individuals with leadership positions in the life of the church carry the responsibility to use the power inherent in their roles in the best interests of those whom they serve. Therefore it is in the best interest of the church and its ministry to offer clear guidelines and expectations of those who would endeavor to minister on its behalf.

First, the issue of power and vulnerability engender tremendous confusion in the discussion of ethical behavior for religious leaders. The work of Marie Fortune is helpful here, and most of the ideas that follow rely heavily on her work as presented in the training manual entitled, “Clergy Misconduct: Sexual Abuse in the Ministerial Relationship”. While most times we think of power as a fixed concept; i.e., individuals having power over others, in reality power is a relational concept. Individuals have power in relationship to other individuals and the dynamics change from relationship to relationship. For example, a church school teacher has more power than the students whom she teaches, yet that same teacher has less power than the Christian Education director to whom she is accountable. Power and vulnerability are relational concepts determined by the nature of the relationship.

In our culture, sources of power rest in age (adulthood), gender (male), sexual orientation (heterosexual), race (Caucasian), physical resources (ability, size, strength), economic resources (wealth, job skills, credentials), intellectual resources (information, knowledge, etc), psychological resources (breadth of life experience, stability), social resources (support, community contacts), and life circumstances (security, well being). Add to this the role of minister, warden, youth leader, etc. and most often the sources of power will rest with the church leader.

When a person in changing life circumstance such as death or divorce seeks pastoral care from his/her minister, s/he is vulnerable to him because of his/her situation; security and well being are threatened and psychological coping mechanisms may be tested to their limit. S/he is vulnerable because of having fewer resources AT THAT MOMENT IN TIME. It is always the responsibility of the one with more power to use that power in the best interest of the ones whom they serve.

A further clarification is necessary. Even when power appears to be equal in a relationship, it is still the responsibility of the professional to set and maintain the appropriate boundary for the relationship. For example, a pastor and a warden, both with strong skills and gifts in ministry, both with stable life circumstances and relatively equal intellectual and psychological resources may appear to have pretty much equal power in this situation. However, it remains primarily a professional relationship and the responsibility for boundary maintenance falls to the pastor. The purpose of their relationship is professional, to serve the needs of the church that entrusts them with both power and responsibility.

This leads directly to a second important concept in understanding the nature of the ministerial relationship and the importance of maintaining them with integrity and faithfulness. The purpose of ministerial relationships is ministry, in all its rich and varied forms. And ministry exists so that the church might fully be the Church at work in the world for the sake of the gospel. It is a violation of role to step outside of the prescribed boundaries that empower such relationships. The ministerial relationship presupposes certain role expectations: the ministry is expected to make available certain resources, talents, knowledge and expertise which will serve the best interests of the congregant, client, employee, student staff member, etc. Sexual contact or sexualized behavior is not part of the ministerial role. Such behavior is characteristic of a sexually intimate relationship, not a professional (i.e., ministerial) relationship.

Further, it is a misuse of power and authority. The ministerial role carries within it power and authority and the attendant responsibility to use this power to benefit the people who call upon that person for service. This power can be easily misused, as is the case when a minister uses (intentionally or unintentionally) his/her authority to initiate or pursue a sexual contact with a congregant or staff member. Even if the congregant/staff member attempts to sexualize the relationship it is still the responsibility of the minister to maintain the boundary of the ministerial relationship.

Finally, sexualized behavior within the ministerial relationship is an ethical violation because there is an absence of meaningful consent. This is a source of tremendous misunderstanding in the church. Comments like, "they were consenting adults", "s/he went along of their own free will", and "I didn't force myself on her, how can you say I took advantage?" all represent misconceptions about consent and free choice.

Meaningful consent to sexual activity requires a context not merely of choice, but of equality; hence meaningful consent requires the absence of any constraint. Where there is an imbalance of power between two persons arising out of role difference, there is no true equality. And without equal power there can be no true and meaningful consent. In our work with survivors of clergy sexual abuse we often ask, "If this person were not your minister, if you had not needed help from him, if your life were healthy and happy and your needs were met, if you had met this person socially or if he were your next door neighbor – an equal – would you have gotten involved with him?" Their response is usually NO. This suggests that the relationship came about because of the individual's vulnerability to the minister's power and authority. Therefore the choice to become sexually involved was not a free choice and the minister's behavior was abusive.

Clarity around these concepts is crucial if we are to act with integrity in our relationships and intervene in appropriate and healing ways when boundaries are violated. The nature of ministerial relationships means that we will oftentimes be with people in moments of great vulnerability and therefore be at risk to violate appropriate boundaries. The responsibility is ever before us to be cognizant of our responsibilities and our resources in relationship to those whom we serve.

Maintaining clarity about responsibilities and boundaries in ministry presupposes a level of personal and professional health as well as access to supervision and ongoing opportunities for professional development. Each individual in a ministerial position can greatly reduce the risk of boundary violation through self-knowledge and self-care. An understanding of personal history and its effects on our behavior and perception can make us less likely to violate boundaries. If we are aware of our personal needs and are taking care of those needs in appropriate ways we are less likely to impose

those needs on others. In addition, peer supervision, trusting relationships with colleagues and formal supervision are important arenas for professional reflection wherein we can examine our ministerial roles and relationships and receive feedback. To regularly engage in such self-assessment and supervision is a responsibility of each one in a ministerial relationship. It is the single most important factor in maintaining appropriate boundaries.

The difficult and complex issues faced by the church in regard to sexual abuse and ministerial relationships will remain for some time. However, each one who makes a conscious decision to increase his or her level of education and awareness, each one who engages in self-reflective and supervisory behavior greatly reduces the incidence of and the potential for violation in ministerial relationships.