

Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity: The Journal of Treatment & Prevention

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usac20>

Pastors and Sexual Addiction MARK R. LAASER, 2003

Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity, 10:139–149, 2003 Copyright © Taylor & Francis Inc.

Faithful and True Ministries, Eden Prairie, Minnesota, USA

The purpose of this article is to explore the ways that pastors may experience sexual addiction in their professional and personal life. Sexually addicted pastors can present unique clinical problems that need to be assessed and addressed in the treatment process. This article describes some of these unique issues faced by pastors and what clinicians can do to best assess and incorporate these issues into treatment planning for sexually addicted pastors.

“Stan” is a successful pastor in a large Protestant denomination. Since his college days, Stan has struggled with pornography and masturbation. He has wanted to stop but can’t. He hoped that by getting married, his “lust” would be taken away. He was somewhat shocked and very disappointed that regular marital sex didn’t stop him from looking at pornography and masturbating. Periodically, he would “repent” and try to stop these activities but would always return to them.

Over the years of his ministry, Stan frequently used his free time to visit a variety of video stores to rent pornographic videos. Recently, when the church purchased a new computer and obtained online access, Stan became fascinated with Internet pornography. Lately, he has also become preoccupied with the idea of going to a massage parlor. In his first three churches that he served Stan became very emotionally involved with several women in the church. In his current congregation he established a similar relationship with the organist, a married member of his church, which became sexual. Stan is depressed and is having great difficulty performing his pastoral duties. He doesn’t know to whom to talk. His wife is questioning what is going on.

Stan is one example of the many pastors that become compulsive in their use of sexuality to medicate and feel better about their lives. For them, sex becomes the drug of choice. Stan is not alone in his sexual addiction, however, the complexity of his situation is multiplied by the fact that he is a pastor. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the unique problems

Address correspondence to Mark R. Laaser, Faithful and True Ministries, 6542 Regency Lane, Eden Prairie, MN 55344. E-mail: mlaaser@aol.com

associated with pastors who are sexually addicted and suggest ways for clinicians to address these unique issues through assessment and treatment.

FACTORS INVOLVED IN PASTORAL SEX ADDICTION

There are a number of factors, some unique to pastors, that can contribute to cases of sexual addiction. Six of the most common factors are discussed in this section.

Family

Like all sex addicts, it is likely that pastoral sex addicts have come from a background of abuse. The incidence of all forms of abuse in a population of pastors is consistent with the findings for all sex addicts. Carnes (1991) found that 81% of sex addicts are sexual trauma survivors, 74% survivors of physical trauma, and 97% survivors of emotional trauma.

As a result of family-of-origin issues, many pastoral sexual addicts are “shame-based”. They have a difficult time distinguishing between guilt (making a mistake) and shame (being a mistake). This is consistent with all sex addicts, but a pastor theologizes this and believes that he or she is not worthy of God’s grace. Many pastoral sex addicts are able to preach and teach about grace but do not accept it for themselves.

Emotional incest and emotional abandonment are two forms of emotional abuse that many pastoral sex addicts report experiencing in childhood (Adams, 1991). In emotional incest families these pastors have learned how to care for others and not for themselves. They may assume that their worth is derived from how well they care for others. This may constitute a form of pastoral codependency. These pastors will judge their worth based on external approval and outward signs of success. This may result in a righteous workaholicism and consequent burn out. Their sexual addiction represents role reversal from the overly erotic atmosphere of the covert incest experience. When assuming the pastoral role, they gain a sense of power and control that they lost in the covert incest.

In families where emotional abandonment occurred, these individuals became starved for nurturance but have no idea of how to find it. Their sexual activity represents an attempt to fill legitimate needs but through illegitimate or shameful means. The consequences to their relationships are profound and many pastors find that while they have social acquaintances, they have no intimate friendships. This leaves them alone and isolated with resulting depression. Many of these pastors suffer from chronic depression but would not be likely to recognize it and seek help for it.

Often, growing up in a family experiencing physical abuse may lead to a repressed anger that can be covered with an overt pacifism. Many addicted

pastors from these types of families are angry and express it in passive expression, for example, using sarcasm and humor to put others down.

Other pastors have been physically abandoned of healthy touch and nurturance or have been left alone as children. Like all sex addicts this may lead to an excessive craving for touch (which is sexualized) and a pattern of being alone. The pastoral role allows for pastors to be alone. This alone time can be spiritually interpreted as being reflective or meditative.

Invasive sexual abuse is an obvious factor in the formation of sexual addiction. Like physical abuse, the nature of the abuse, the age at which it was perpetrated, and the gender and relationship of the perpetrator will influence the sexual expression of addicted activity in later life. There is a need for more careful consideration of how the dynamics of trauma bonding or the repetition of trauma gets acted out within the context of the pastoral role (Schwartz & Master, 1994). Trauma bonds can lead to what has been called the victim-to-victimizer cycle. Blanchard (1991), for example, has demonstrated how similar pastoral sexual involvement with parishioners is to biological incest. The role of pastor as parental and trusted figure provides a dangerous transference for most parishioners even in situations that externally may seem like mutual sexual consent.

Spiritual Abuse

A sexually addicted pastor may be the victim of rigid spiritual formation, in which he or she feels inferior in the sight of God, or as the victim of the abandonment of spiritual modeling (Laaser, 1996). When these pastors are also the victims of other forms of abuse at the hands of someone who is a spiritual authority in their life, the result may be a feeling of spiritual inferiority and an impaired ability to trust. They may over-moralize issues and project a public image of being angrily opposed to pornography, prostitution, homo- sexuality, or abortion. This is a form of reaction formation, being angry at behaviors they are shameful about themselves. They may then project their angry reaction onto congregants during sermons or counseling sessions. Many pastors who have committed sexual misconduct have appeared angry to those around them. Whatever these pastor's intellectual theology may be, they may be arrested in a rather adolescent, black and white, theology emotionally, particularly when it comes to their self-perception (Fowler, 1981). They may be able to proclaim a mature theology to others and not believe it for themselves.

Sexually addicted pastors, who suffer from arrested adolescent theological development may also believe certain delusional qualities about themselves. An addict's normal sense of entitlement may be enhanced by a narcissistic view of oneself. Pastoral sexual addicts' narcissism may also allow them to feel that they won't get caught because of some sense of special protection by God from being discovered. The adolescent quality of their

beliefs may cause them to think that they are being victimized by the people they serve and that they are being overworked and underpaid. Finally, this same type of thinking allows them to blame others, including seductive men or women, for various forms of sexual misconduct or offense.

Role and Identity

There are two factors to evaluate in sexually addicted pastors concerning their role and identity. First, what is the identity they bring into the role of pastor based on their personality and developmental history? Second, what aspects of the role of pastor contribute to the risk of sexual addiction?

Trauma leaves the sexually addicted pastor shame based, narcissistically injured, developmentally arrested, and dependent. Experience demonstrates that many pastors are hoping that the role of pastor will bring relief from their identity issues. One pastor said that she hoped to be "ontologically transformed," by her ordination. Laaser (1991) referred to this as, "ordination as a shame reduction strategy." She hoped that her sexual addiction would be arrested and that she would be a new person. Similarly, some pastors hope that the ordination vows they take will prevent them from acts of sexual immorality. Many Catholic priests, for example, believe that the right of ordination and vow of celibacy will stop them from inappropriate sexual thoughts and acts.

The role, status, and power of minister may bring narcissistically injured people a sense of relief from their inferiority and woundedness. One pastor described the "high" he felt after preaching a good sermon and receiving affirmations from his people. The trappings of the pastoral role, robes, special clothing, access to people's homes and lives, and adulation and trust as "people of God," do create a vulnerability to grandiosity. It can be that pastoral sex addicts become as dependent on the role of pastor as they are to anything else.

Pastoral sex addicts come from families that assign them roles that can lead them into ministry. They are often heroes and expected to be heroic. This role can be combined with the role of a

“saint,” a role in which they are expected to be religious. Many Catholic priests, for example, tell stories about times in their childhood in which they somehow knew that were meant to be a priest. One of them referred to this as “being ordained by my mother and not by the Church.” These pastors can also be caretakers or enablers having learned how to care for others, doing lots of things, but not able to care for themselves. As previously noted, this can lead to workaholism and burnout.

Another common role is that of “lost child.” Pastors who are lost children receive affirmation for being independent and strong and without any noticeable needs. Lost children spend lots of time alone, seemingly self-

sufficient, but really lonely. Pastors can feel comfortable in this role, which may be part of the reason they have difficulty admitting problems to others. They can even theologically justify alone time as being part of their needs for meditation and prayer. Meditation and prayer are valuable activities, but these pastors have no sense of a balance between participating in community and being alone.

The role and identity of a pastor becomes dangerous when people transfer great power and status to it, giving away a childlike trust to the pastor. This transference and trust blinds people to the inappropriate nature of certain requests. People may be willing to please the pastor in many ways, including sexual, and assume that it is the pastor asking and, therefore, it must be all right. Conversely, a wounded pastor who doesn't feel truly powerful may not be fully aware of the power his or her role has with people. His or her own shame and dependence craves affirmation and may encourage the positive transference, even in unconscious ways. Some pastors consciously and unconsciously encouraged sexually seductive behavior because of the affirmation and attention it brings.

Many situations in which a pastor becomes sexually inappropriate with a parishioner begins with the pastor being a warm and caring parent-like figure. When the parishioner responds with willing trust, the pastor can come to depend and crave this adulation. His or her own needs may become more and more apparent in the relationship. Many victims have described a time when the relationship switched from one in which they were being cared for to one in which they were caring for the pastor.

All pastors have very demanding roles. People crave their time and attention. Sexually addicted pastors don't know how to balance caregiving time with time for self-nurturance. They may be starved for attention and nurturance. Like all sex addicts they interpret that sex is equal to love and may seek to get their needs fulfilled sexually. There can be a certain adolescent anger to their interpretation of their neediness. They may complain about the demands of their people and project a martyr-like image of themselves. They may then also come to feel “entitled” to needs fulfillment. This angry, martyr-like entitlement is the fuel of self-delusion that can allow them to cross sexual boundaries.

Isolation

The pastoral role, at least in most parish settings, is one in which there is very little accountability. A pastor may have elders, a church council, or a supervising pastor from the denomination (e.g., conference minister, bishop), but there is usually very little direct supervision. Many congregation members will put a minister on a pedestal expecting him or her to be hero-like. Atop this pedestal clergy are expected to be self-sufficient and self-reliant,

able to care for themselves. Clergy are expected to be alone and to not need monitoring.

There may also be many people around the church on a daily basis, but many of the pastor's normal daily activities afford the opportunity to leave. As stated above, pastors may have been isolated and alone as children, even experiencing the role of the lost child. As addicts, pastors will thrive on this aloneness. It affords them the opportunity to act out in private ways and maintain their "double life," one public and honored, the other private and perverse.

Trust

Clergy are given, at least historically, a total measure of trust. This is the nature of the pedestal on which they sit. People transfer to clergy their need for a loving and nurturing parent and a direct link with God. God the father or mother often is personified in the role of pastor.

Unfortunately, for pastoral sexual addicts, this trust and transference gives them rather instant access to people's lives. This access may be abused. The trust factor can allow a pastor to go unchallenged for years. People may ignore obvious symptoms of trouble because they want, or in fact need, the pastor to be innocent and blameless. This author worked with a church in which the general membership revolted against the leadership of the church for firing their "beloved" pastor. Historically, even church leaders have wanted to protect the role of pastor. This has led many to cover up sexual misconduct. The geographic cure has sometimes been the result in which a pastor is transferred to another situation in all likelihood to repeat the same behavior. Many have excused this behavior as being the quiet and loving thing to do for all concerned.

Consequences

Pastors, by nature of their training, should know how to access help for themselves. Given a previously discussed dynamic, however, they often know only how to help others and not themselves. One of the excuses often heard as to why they don't go for help is "Who can I talk to confidentially?" There is a built-in fear of consequences in this question. If there is any inclination to reach out for help, it may be met with the knowledge that addictive sexual behavior is considered "sinful" and that to reach out would bring shame and disgrace.

In the current legal climate in which entire churches and even denominations have been sued for a pastor's sexual misconduct, the threat of immediate dismissal and inability to return to the ministry is even more real. Legal liability has done much to prevent church leaders from even considering the question of restoration to ministry. It becomes harder to convince a pastor that it is better to be honest than it is to lead a miserable and secret life.

ASSESSMENT

Pastors who are sexually addicted are impaired professionals. As such they should be thoroughly assessed as to the degree of impairment. A complete assessment will be important in determining a pastor's ability to continue to practice ministry or return to ministry after a period of rehabilitation. The key questions of assessment are whether a pastor is safe to practice ministry, or if there is a danger of further sexual misconduct. This will be particularly true if the pastor has sexually offended against a vulnerable person.

The real goal of this kind of professional assessment is to recommend the appropriate forms of treatment that the diagnosis and level of impairment suggests. Clergy can be restored to the

practice of ministry depending on the severity of their illness and the nature of the sexual misconduct. (In cases of sexual offending, the legal liabilities of denominational bodies may prevent them from being able to restore a minister to practice, even if the minister seems healthy enough to return.) A careful plan of ongoing rehabilitation and accountability can be designed and ongoing sobriety or freedom from illness can be maintained (Irons, 1991).

Therapists working with clergy will find it helpful to use a third party for the assessment of when and if a pastor is healthy enough to return to work. This takes the therapist out of the role of “policing” the client and helps to maintain the trust necessary in the therapeutic alliance.

TREATMENT ISSUES

In most ways treatment for the pastor who is sexually addicted is not different than for any other sexually addicted client. It may involve in-patient or intensive out-patient treatment. Long-term care will require individual, marriage, and family therapy, attendance at support groups, and a network of accountability. Patrick Carnes’ model of recovery containing educational, behavioral, and psycho-dynamic components is the most effective form of treatment.

It is often thought that clergy issues require special clergy support groups because only other clergy will truly understand the issues involved. The factor of confidentiality also may be used by clergy to avoid general addiction groups. While it may be occasionally helpful to provide clergy-only groups, it can be more helpful for a pastor to participate in general recovery for sexual addiction. It may be just as important to recover from narcissism and dependence on the pastoral role as it is to recover from sexual addiction.

Other consideration in the treatment of pastoral sexual addicts may included the following issues.

Vocational Guidance

It is strongly suggested that sexually addicted pastors be given the time and opportunity to take a leave of absence from the pastoral role. This is obviously financially difficult for pastors with families, however it is important. This time away from the role is important so that the addict can focus on recovery, both from sexual addiction and the narcissism and dependence on the pastoral role, and learn how to care for him or herself and not just others.

It is possible that sexual misconduct has created a situation in which it will be difficult for a minister to return to the practice of ministry or to certain forms of it. A minister who has offended against vulnerable members of a congregation will have difficulty returning to parish ministry. Some sex addicts have compared this to an alcoholic being a bartender.

Clergy will need to re-examine their “calling” or vocation. As we said earlier, there are dysfunctional reasons why a person may have chosen the ministerial role. Finding healing from this dysfunction will be important before a mature decision can be made.

Spiritual Direction

An important facet of vocational guidance will also be spiritual direction. If a person is to find true calling as clergy, one’s own theology may dictate that this calling be heard from God. There has been a rich tradition of “soul care” for centuries in most faith traditions. In the twentieth century, spiritual direction has often been confused with psychological counseling. The field of pastoral counseling, for example, has vacillated as to whether or not a pastoral counselor provides

psychological or spiritual counseling. It is recommended clergy receive spiritual direction from a person qualified to do so. Spiritual reflection, prayer, scripture study, theological study, and worship are the tools of the spiritual director. Meeting with this person can be a matter or daily or weekly activity and may coexist with counseling and support groups.

Spiritual direction provides an important added component to the process of recovery from sexual addiction for all addicts. Resolution of early trauma, for example, demands that the trauma be recognized, felt, and grieved. Spiritual direction, however, demands that a person move past the trauma to a place of reconciliation or forgiveness. This process may take years, but the goal of forgiveness is one that purely secular counseling often ignores.

Family Support

Clergy function in communities of faith. Their biological families are entrenched in these communities. In the process of intervening on clergy who have committed sexual misconduct, spouses and children are often ignored. The events of discovery of misconduct may be dramatic. Clergy have been

asked to leave churches literally overnight. Family members have suddenly lost the ability to participate in their community, perhaps even being uprooted geographically. Public humiliation also may be a factor in this process. Family members become the innocent secondary victims of the sexual misconduct. Often the wife's or children's needs become secondary to the more urgent need to find help for the clergy member. Instead family members have often been expected to be strong and help to emotionally, physically, spiritually, and financially survive the crisis.

It is also not uncommon for a spouse to be blamed for the sexual misconduct. If he or she had been more "available" emotionally and sexually, the clergy wouldn't have needed the "outside" sex. The pedestal hero-like nature of the clergy role often prevents many from seeing where true responsibility for misconduct lies. This dynamic can make it even more difficult for family members to be seen as needing help.

It is also probably true that the same dysfunction that causes clergy to commit misconduct will create various forms of dysfunction in the family. Spouses may have their own backgrounds of trauma. Marriage issues may be very pronounced. This level of estrangement may be being used by clergy to justify their misconduct. It is important, therefore, for all members of a clergy family to be assessed as to his or her own issues. Support and attention should be given equally to all members of the family.

Church Support

For those clergy sexual addicts who have been serving churches, it is imperative to attend to the needs of the congregations they have served. The diagnosis of sexual addiction may or may not mean that a pastor has to leave his or her congregation. The presence of sexual offending behavior will usually be the determining factor.

For those pastors who remain in the churches there will need to be a process of counseling between the pastor and the leadership of the church. This will not be unlike marriage and family counseling. A church is like any other system and there can be just as many unhealthy dynamics of it as there are church members. If churches are places that reach out to wounded people, there will be wounded people there projecting their issues on to each other. If the pastor's recovery can be

used courageously as a model for others, more mature communities of faith can be built. Certainly, accountability for the pastor's recovery will be a vital part of this process.

In those situations in which a pastor has to leave it will be even more important to provide healing to the church congregation. There will be those who have been directly sexually violated (primary victims) and there will be those whose trust and faith have been damaged (secondary victims). It is important that congregants be allowed to voice feelings, whatever they are, during support groups or meetings set up by the church.

Counter-Transference

Working with pastoral sex addicts raises traditional counter-transference issues that any professional might have. It is often challenging to deal with the narcissism, dependency, and addiction. The nature of sexual activity may be difficult to hear about. Working with sexual offending behavior is always a mine field in how much it may get clinicians in touch with their own trauma issues. In addition to these possibilities, working with clergy sex addicts also may raise issues of the clinician's own faith. What is the role of pastoral authority? Has the clinician been damaged emotionally, sexually, or spiritually by clergy in the past? What is the level of our faith in a God who might allow these things to happen? It is not uncommon for faith and trust to be challenged by the sexual hypocrisy of those of call themselves clergy. The clinician's own level of maturity and spiritual support should be in some order before we try to deal with clergy.

CONCLUSION

Sex addiction is about a search for intimacy. Sex addicts long for nurturance and acceptance. They are lonely and lacking of true community. In this search for intimacy, sex addiction is a confused spirituality. Much of what sex addicts long for is truly a matter of spiritual longing and quest.

Working with pastoral sex addicts requires therapists to be familiar with traditional sex addiction dynamics as well as issues unique to the vocation. The vocation is often unconsciously chosen by the pastor to cover childhood trauma and sexual issues. Treatment must address this and include: 12-step participation, behavioral and cognitive intervention, insight analysis, and expressive modalities designed to abreact the underlying trauma (Adams, 1997). Treatment also should include spiritual direction and assistance in values clarification. This allows the pastor to unearth the unconscious reasons for choosing the ministry and offers an opportunity to consciously choose the vocation from a position of spiritual and emotional maturity. Integrating sexuality into the whole of their self is crucial to the prevention of sexual acting-out.

Personality disorders and identity issues also need to be addressed in treatment. Entitlement, dependency, and narcissism are common themes. If the pastor returns to active ministry, an accountability program should be established. Getting an independent evaluation to determine the specifics of a return to work helps the therapist to maintain the trust and safety necessary in the therapeutic alliance.

Offering healing and treatment to pastors and their congregations are important steps in repairing communities damaged by sexual addiction. By bringing healing to this group, we assist in the transformation of sexually addicted pastors from "unhealed wounders" to "wounded healers."

|