



Working together to end sexual & domestic violence

For The Laity:

What you in the congregation need to know about ...

Clergy misconduct: sexual abuse in the ministerial relationship.

Q What is sexual abuse within the ministerial relationship?

A Sexual abuse happens when someone in a ministerial role (clergy, religious, or lay) engages in sexual contact or sexualized behavior with a congregant, employee, student or counseling client in the ministerial relationship. Sexual abuse can include physical contact from the person in the ministerial role, such as:

- sexual touch and “accidental” touch of sexual areas of the body
- tickling and playful aggression that seem uncomfortable to you
- a prolonged hug when a brief hug is customary behavior
- kissing on the lips when a kiss on the cheek would be appropriate
- pressing up against your body when hugging
- an inappropriate gift from your minister or rabbi (such as lingerie)
- sexual intercourse with your minister or rabbi

Sexual abuse can also include verbal behavior initiated by a person in a ministerial role when such behavior sexualizes a relationship. Examples include:

- innuendo or sexual talk
- suggestive comments
- tales of his or her sexual exploits or experiences
- questions about the intimate details of your relationships
- looking for sympathy about his or her partner’s sexual inadequacies
- inviting you to hot tub or swim naked, etc.



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Toll free orders: 877-860-2255
orders@faithtrustinstitute.org
www.faithtrustinstitute.org

We want to acknowledge the contributions of Reverend Carol Jean Miller and numerous survivors of sexual abuse by clergy in developing this brochure.

Q Why is it wrong?

A Sexual contact within the ministerial relationship is a violation of professional ethics. There is a difference in power between a person in a ministerial role and a member of his or her congregation or a counselee. You cannot give meaningful consent to sexual contact since there is a difference in power between you.

You will seek counseling or support from your minister or rabbi usually at times of stress or crisis in your life. During these times, you are vulnerable emotionally and can be taken advantage of by a minister who does not do what is best for you.

Q Is sexual contact between you and a religious leader ever okay?

A Meaningful consent can occur when two people are relatively equal in power and when fear, coercion or manipulation are completely absent from their relationship. Clergy who are seeking a romantic relationship can do so outside their own congregations. If a religious leader becomes interested in dating or romance with a member of his or her congregation (though this is complicated and not advisable), the clergyperson must remove him/herself from a ministerial role in that person's life before ethically pursuing a relationship of this nature. Questions that need to be asked to evaluate if it is possible to pursue this type of romantic relationship include:

- Was the ministerial relationship minimal in nature (no counseling involved)?
- Is the minister or rabbi willing to remove him or herself from the ministerial relationship?
- Is the minister/rabbi willing to be open about the relationship with the congregation?

Q How do you know if your boundaries have been crossed?

- A**
- You feel uncomfortable and confused with the interaction even if you are initially flattered.
 - You are receiving unusual time and attention from the minister or rabbi.
 - You are receiving personal gifts from the minister or rabbi.
 - When you meet with the minister or rabbi for counseling, you end up talking more about his or her problems than about yours.
 - The minister or rabbi is inviting you out for intimate, social occasions.
 - The minister or rabbi touches you in a way that you find confusing, uncomfortable, or upsetting.
 - The minister or rabbi gives you theological rationale for questionable conduct, e.g. "God has brought us together."

Q What should you do if you are sexually attracted to your minister or rabbi?

A There is nothing wrong with you or your feelings. Your minister may be a very attractive, sensitive, caring person. Should you choose to share your feelings of attraction with your minister or rabbi, it is the minister/rabbi's professional responsibility to honor your feelings and help you to understand that he or she cannot reciprocate your interest in an intimate relationship. If the minister or rabbi rejects your attention, he or she is doing his or her job and trying to preserve the ministerial relationship with you. In other words, he or she is being your minister.

Q What should you do if you believe you are a victim of sexual abuse by a minister or rabbi?

- A**
- Pay attention to your feelings and trust yourself.
 - Share your confusion, fear or anxiety with someone you trust.
 - Remember that you are not to blame, even if you agreed to the relationship in the beginning.
 - Find out if your congregation, synod, conference, etc. has a specific policy and procedure for dealing with complaints about clergy misconduct. Use that process to make a complaint.
 - Find an advocate who understands church or synagogue systems; rely on him or her for guidance and support.

- Remember that you might not be the only person to whom this has happened and that your action can help both yourself and others.
- If a child has been sexually abused by someone in a ministerial role, make an immediate report to a law enforcement agency in your community.
- If you wish to make a complaint against a pastoral counselor, find out if he or she is a member of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors. Make the complaint there as well as to the church or synagogue.

Contact:
American Association of Pastoral Counselors
9504A Lee Highway
Fairfax, Virginia 22031
(703) 385-6967

*"God has told you what is good;
and what is it that the Lord asks of you?
Only to do justice, and to love goodness,
and to walk humbly with your God."*

– Micah 6:8

Q How can you help your church or synagogue prepare for the possibility of sexual abuse by clergy?

- A** Your congregation, synod, conference, etc. will benefit from examining the issue of sexual abuse within the ministerial relationship. You may wish to pose these questions as a way of helping your church or synagogue develop a compassionate and just system of responding to the potential problem of sexual abuse by clergy.
- Does your church or synagogue have a policy and procedure for responding to sexual abuse or other violations of professional ethics within the ministerial relationship?
 - Is the policy widely disseminated to clergy and members of the congregation?
 - Has training on the issue been made available to members of the congregation and clergy?

Q Where can you find more information on the subject?

A The following organizations can provide you with more information on clergy misconduct/sexual abuse:

FaithTrust Institute
Telephone toll-free inside U.S.: 877-860-2255
Outside U.S.: 206-634-1903
www.faithtrustinstitute.org

American Association of Pastoral Counselors
9504A Lee Highway
Fairfax, Virginia 22031
(703) 385-6967
www.aapc.org