

2004

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Recommended Citation

Meek, Katheryn Rhoads; McMinn, Mark R.; Burnett, Todd; Mazzarella, Chris; and Voytenko, Vitaliy L., "Sexual Ethics Training in Seminary: Preparing Students to Manage Feelings of Sexual Attraction" (2004). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. Paper 154.

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Sexual Ethics Training in Seminary: Preparing Students to Manage Feelings of Sexual Attraction

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Sexual boundary violations by clergy have received heightened media attention in recent years with far reaching implications for the long-term well-being of the Church as an institution. While much has been written about the causes and implications of sexual misconduct by clergy, very little research has addressed preventative efforts. Prevention begins in graduate school or seminary. How do seminary alumni perceive the quality of their training in the areas of understanding and maintaining sexual health as well as in managing feelings of sexual attraction in professional contexts? In this survey, 585 alumni from 5 evangelical seminaries answered questions related to their graduate training with regard to their coursework and training environments. Results suggest that minimal attention is given to both. Respondents were more likely than other helping professionals (i.e., psychologists) to believe that the experience of sexual attraction is unethical and to deny experiencing it in their professional contexts. Survey respondents reported coping with feelings of sexual attraction in a private, internal manner. However, respondents reported a surprisingly low incidence of sexual misconduct compared to previous research of clergy. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

KEY WORDS: seminary ethics training; clergy misconduct; prevention; sexual attraction.

Sexual boundary violations remain a prevalent problem within the pastorate. Whereas once a topic shrouded by silence, secrecy, and even cover-up, it is now a national media topic. Undoubtedly the implications of sexual misconduct by clergy are far reaching and how the Church responds now will have long-term

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repercussions. Empirical data verify the enormity of the problem. A survey administered through the Fuller Institute of Church Growth found that 37% of pastors confessed to having been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church, and 12% had engaged in sexual intercourse with a church member (as cited in Headington, 1997). Other researchers report similar data with the estimated incidence of inappropriate clergy sexual behavior ranging from 6 to 40% (Birchard, 2000; Grenz & Bell, 2001; Muck, 1998; Seat, Trent, & Kim, 1993). According to data provided by Seat et al. (1993), approximately 70% of clergy report having knowledge of their colleagues engaging in sexual contact with someone within their congregations, and 24% have counseled a woman who reported previous sexual contact with a pastor.

Much has been written about the causes of sexual misconduct by clergy, with speculation ranging from the person who suffers from severe psychopathology (e.g., narcissistic personality disorder) to more seemingly subtle contributors such as issues of power, institutional inattentiveness, clergy disillusionment, personal crisis, loneliness, unexpressed depression, church/marital conflict, and facing ambiguous boundaries (Birchard, 2000; Brewster, 1996; Cowan, 2002; Jacobs, 2000). Whereas the former pastors require a much different approach to training and remediation, the latter may be naïve but not malicious as they are basically appropriate and healthy people who follow a predictable path of attraction, arousal (perhaps including sexual fantasy), and finally sexual misconduct (Steinke, 1989; Thoburn & Balswick, 1994).

Unfortunately, issues related to clergy sexuality are not typically addressed, celebrated, or even understood within the Church, perhaps because clergy take on a clear role of spiritual mentor, advisor, and even link to God, and are thus somehow assumed to not be sexual beings with similar temptations and lusts (Francis & Turner, 1995). As a result, clergy may be unprepared with regard to their readiness to engage in the often emotionally taxing roles they play in the lives of the people they serve. Whereas psychologists and professional counselors have clearly defined roles delineated by an enforceable ethics code that can lead to both professional and legal ramifications for violations and are often trained in managing sexual attraction in their graduate programs, clergy often are left to their own designs when facing diverse and often muddled boundaries. In fact, pastors and pastoral counselors are often *protected* from professional liability with a first amendment right that essentially forbids government regulation of their professional activities (Young & Griffith, 1995).

Ultimately, then, responsibility falls to the Church and its training institutions to regulate and screen those who enter the field. In other words, churches and seminaries need to promote, require, and provide initial and ongoing education as well as effective regulation in order to protect the public and maintain the integrity of the institution (Conklin, 1997; Cowan, 2002; Young & Griffith, 1995). Prevention begins in graduate school or seminary. The good news is that it appears

that seminaries are aware of the gravity of the situation and are also aware that they carry the primary responsibility of protecting the public from unethical or poorly trained professionals. In addition, clergy themselves are also reporting a desire for increased accountability and mentoring, but feel a lack of organizational support and fear reprisal for acknowledging personal problems or seeking out counseling (Meek et al., in press; see also Francis & Turner, 1995; Goetz, 1992; Hart, McBurney, Palmberg, & Seamands, 1988).

Before training programs are developed, it is important to first understand the perceived effectiveness of already existing training attempts. Haug & Alexander (1994) contend that on a whole, clergy training does not adequately address issues related to professional ethics, personal growth and development, sexuality or self-care (as cited in Haug, 1999). Haug (1999) concludes that it is imperative to raise clergy awareness about issues related to ethics, sexuality, boundaries, etc., specifically through a seminary training curriculum which not only requires but where faculty models the open engagement in self-examination as a part of training (see also Birchard, 2000; Steinke, 1989; Thoburn & Balswick, 1993). Conklin (1997) recommends that more than one course should be required and specifically that “courses should lead people into a safe space where they can take risks, participate in dialogue, and deliberate significant moral questions related to human sexuality . . . followed by opportunities—through case studies, for example—to focus cognitively, professionally, and strategically on sexual issues that will be encountered in future career settings” (p. 167). She further admonishes educators themselves to be comfortable both with their own sexuality and able to flexibly and openly discuss issues without judgment.

While not specifically designed for seminary training, Pope, Sonne, & Holroyd (1993) outline ten conditions that psychology graduate training programs need to foster in order to create an optimal learning environment with regard to the issue of sexuality. It should be noted that most of the conditions pertain to the training environment more than the training curriculum. These conditions appear to be very similar to Conklin’s (1997) recommendations. Therefore, it is assumed that a variation of these same ten conditions apply to seminary training.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were selected from the alumni databases of 5 evangelical seminaries throughout the United States. Each of the five seminaries sent us a database of M.Div. graduates, from which we either used the entire list (for smaller seminaries), or randomly selected 400 names (for larger seminaries). A total of 1366 alumni received a survey packet, and 585 provided responses,

resulting in an overall response rate of 43%. Response rates between the seminaries varied considerably, ranging from 34% to 62%.

Of the 585 respondents, 90% were male, 10% were female and 92% were currently married. Interestingly, 107 participants did not report ethnicity. Of those who did, 86% were of European descent, 8% of Asian descent, 2% of African descent, 2% of Hispanic descent, and 2% of other descent. Respondents' ages ranged from 25 to 75 years, with an average age of 39. Most of the respondents graduated within the past ten years (93%), with dates of graduation ranging from 1957–2002. Eighty-nine percent reported holding M.Div. degrees, and 20% also possessed additional degrees (i.e., D.Min, Ph.D., M.A.). While in seminary, 55% followed a general pastoral track, 23% a pastoral counseling or pastoral ministries track, and the remainder chose various other tracks (i.e., church planting, urban ministry). Close to half of all respondents are currently senior pastors, 14% are associate pastors, 6% engage in youth or college ministry, and 11% are in non church related positions. Participants who are now ministers were asked to indicate from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“a great deal”) whether several pastoral functions are an area of major responsibility for them. Respondents reported being actively involved in preaching (Mean = 4.01), teaching (4.15), administration (3.98), and leading groups (3.86), moderately involved in mentoring (3.46), evangelism (3.42), pastoral counseling (3.32), and leading worship (3.06), and less involved in working with youth (2.59). For those that do provide counseling, 90% see seven people or less per week.

Instrument

The questionnaire was divided into five parts. Participants were first asked to provide basic demographic and seminary information. Seminary information included degree, year granted, seminary track, number of courses in counseling and human sexuality, and number of books and articles read about sexuality and sexual boundaries. Since completing seminary, participants were asked to indicate their current position, the number of workshops and seminars they have attended related to both counseling and sexuality, as well as the number of books and articles they have read about sexuality and sexual boundaries. In section two, they were asked to rate their major areas of current responsibility. In the third section, participants were asked to rate each of six behaviors related to sexual feelings and behavior in terms of two categories (derived from Pope et al., 1987). They first rated whether they considered the practice to be ethical (no, not sure, yes), and second whether it had ever happened in their ministry (no, yes). In the fourth section, participants evaluated their training programs with a variety of questions based on Pope et al.'s optimal conditions for learning. Finally, in the fifth section participants rated the extent to which they had engaged in several coping responses when experiencing sexual attraction to a parishioner.

Procedure

We sent the surveys in October 2002 using a multiple envelope system that assured anonymity. Those who had not returned the survey after 4 weeks were sent another questionnaire packet. Each of the 5 evangelical seminaries throughout the United States that granted us permission to contact their graduates did so with the understanding that the identities of the seminaries would not be revealed and that a report of the findings would be returned to each of the seminaries for purposes of self-study. Each seminary also provided an introductory cover letter encouraging their graduates to respond for the sake of ongoing curriculum and training improvement.

RESULTS

Training in Counseling and Sexuality

Overall, seminary students appear to be getting some training in counseling, with mean number of courses across seminaries ranging from 1.9 to 3.9 (overall Mean = 2.8). Not surprisingly, there were significant differences depending on type of training track, with those in a pastoral counseling training track receiving more counseling courses than those in a general pastoral track; $F(3, 377) = 10.08$, $p < .001$. Seminarians are reading books and articles on the topics of sexuality (overall Mean = 4.9) and sexual boundaries (overall Mean = 2.7) during seminary as well as independently following their training (Mean = 5.4, 3.2 respectively). In contrast, respondents report a low incidence of courses in human sexuality while in seminary (Mean = 0.3) as well as a low incidence of attending workshops and seminars about sexuality following seminary (Mean = 0.7).

Seminary Atmosphere

The conditions of training outlined by Pope et al. (1993) and mean scores of seminary respondents are summarized in Table 1. Seminary graduates rated the conditions on a scale from 1 ("Not at all") to 5 ("A Great Deal"). Participants responded to the 17 conditions as if they were quite homogeneous; ratings on the 17 items yielded a Cronbach's internal consistency coefficient of .91 and all of the items appeared to contribute similarly to the overall scale reliability. On the whole, seminary graduates give low to modest ratings of their seminary experiences on these conditions. Mean scores on each of the 17 conditions fell at or below 3.2. However, when using the same scale to rate the extent to which participants respected the sexual values and conduct of their faculty members, overall ratings were quite high (Mean = 4.1).

Table 1. Proposed Conditions of Effective Seminary Training and Alumni Ratings

Condition	Explanation	Mean
Acceptance	Encouraged to acknowledge and explore in myself and others areas of human experience, including sexual feelings and responses, that may evoke anxiety, fear, guilt, disgust, outrage, and so on.	2.2
Safe Climate	Felt safe discussing feelings and personal experiences with professors and supervisors. For example, I felt assured that no adverse consequences would result from my disclosure.	2.7
Understanding	Given information regarding sexuality in many different formats (e.g. vignettes of situations in which I was to place myself as the minister, and asked to discuss the case in small groups).	2.0
Encouragement	Encouraged to honestly understand my sexuality, including self-serving motivations for ministry that might make me vulnerable to inappropriate behaviors.	2.2
Openness	Encouraged to be open to receiving information and feedback from others, as well as encouraged to disclose my own experiences and feelings.	2.6
Sensitivity	Encouraged to be sensitive, perceptive, and empathetic in my response to others' disclosures when discussing sexual feelings.	2.8
Frankness	Encouraged by faculty in group discussions to be frank and honest about thoughts and feelings that might be difficult to express.	2.3
Respect	Encouraged to respect others regardless of differing sexual opinions, feelings, or experiences.	2.8
Privacy	Made aware that I was not required to share personal information.	3.2
Support	Supported by my professors/supervisors when I chose to share personal information.	3.3
Commonality	Made aware that sexual attraction toward parishioner is a common experience among ministers.	2.6
Exploration	Faculty/advisors explored the differences between sexual attraction and sexual exploitation.	1.9
Sharing	Your professors or advisors acknowledged their feelings toward parishioners, either in a classroom or individual/group supervision context.	1.6
Consequences for Self	Made aware of the personal and professional consequences of engaging in sexual contact with a parishioner, including knowledge of legal sanctions.	3.0
Consequences for Others	Made aware of the consequences for the parishioner and the church as a whole of engaging in sexual contact with a minister.	2.9
Boundaries	Learned how to set protective boundaries so that I do not become inappropriately close to parishioners.	3.0
Sexual Harassment	Learned the definition of sexual harassment, the negative impact it has on others, and legal ramifications.	2.4

Note. Ratings were made on a 5-point scale (1 = the condition was not at all present in my seminary training program, 5 = the condition was a great deal present in my seminary training program). Adapted from *Sexual feelings in psychotherapy: Explorations for therapists and therapists-in training* (1993), by K. S. Pope, J. L. Sonne, and J. Holroyd, 1993, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Sexuality Beliefs and Behaviors

Seminary alumni respondents reported a surprisingly low incidence of sexual exploitation of parishioners, regardless of how they perceived the adequacy of their graduate training. These findings are highly discrepant with previous research of clergy, in that only 1% of present respondents acknowledged engaging in sexual intimacies with a parishioner. Earlier surveys of pastors' sexual behavior have revealed much more dismal findings. Respondents also overwhelmingly denied ever expressing sexual attraction to a parishioner (96.5%) and kissing a parishioner (95.8%). Two-thirds (65.5%) denied engaging in sexual fantasy about a parishioner.

Two-thirds (66%) of the total sample reported it is unethical or were uncertain about the ethics regarding being sexually attracted to a parishioner, and 39.3% denied ever experiencing it in their ministry. As indicated in Table 2, present respondents are in some ways similar and dissimilar when compared with Christian lay counselors, professional counselors, and psychologists.

Coping Responses

Healthy coping responses were determined by giving the list of 11 coping responses to 16 expert judges, seven were licensed clinical psychologists and 9 were ordained pastors. A coping response was considered healthy if at least 10 of the 16 judges independently agreed on its inclusion. Six of the coping responses were perceived as healthy as determined by these criteria. Overall means are provided for each of these coping responses in Table 3: "I sought out peer support," "I discussed the feelings with my own advisor or counselor," "I reflected upon religious beliefs or moral standards that discourage entertaining any feelings or thoughts that might be considered lustful," "I reflected upon religious beliefs or moral standards that discourage sexual intimacy outside of marriage," "I focused

Table 2. Beliefs and Behaviors Regarding Sexual Attraction Toward Clients or Parishioners

Group	Source	% Reporting sexual attraction toward therapy clients/parishioners is always unethical	% Reporting they have never been sexually attracted to a therapy client/parishioner
Christian lay counselors (therapy clients)	Case et al., 1997	75	59
Christian nonlicensed counselors (clients)	Case et al., 1997	57	44
Christian licensed counselors (clients)	Case et al., 1997	44	32
Psychologists (clients)	Pope et al., 1987	12	9
Christian Psychologists (clients)	Meek & McMinn, 1999	19	11
Pastors (parishioners)	Present research	50	39

Table 3. Coping Strategies Present in Seminary Training

Coping strategies	Overall mean
I told the parishioner about the feelings, but didn't act on them	1.1
I told the parishioner about the feelings and did act on them	1.1
I discussed the feelings with my own advisor or counselor	1.6
I sought out peer support	2.1
I stopped interacting with the parishioner	2.4
I worked through the feelings by myself	3.9
I reflected upon religious beliefs or moral standards that discourage entertaining any feelings or thoughts that might be considered lustful	4.3
I reflected upon religious beliefs or moral standards that discourage sexual intimacy outside of marriage	4.5
I distracted myself by thinking of someone else	2.3
I focused on the negative effects sexual intimacy could have on the parishioner	3.7
I focused on the personal and professional consequences that would result if I acted on my feelings	4.1

Note. Ratings were made on a 5-point scale (1 = I “never” do this, 3 = I “sometimes” do this, 5 = I “always” do this).

on the negative effects sexual intimacy could have on the parishioner,” and “I focused on the personal and professional consequences that would result if I acted on my feelings.” Of the 6 coping responses that were perceived as healthy by the majority of our expert judges only one response received unanimous agreement (discussing the feelings with an advisor or counselor). Two of the coping responses were deemed unhealthy by at least 14 of our 16 expert judges (“I told the parishioner about the feelings, but didn’t act on them”; and “I told the parishioner about the feelings and did act on them”).

We derived a perceived adequacy-of-training score by summing the responses for each of the 17 conditions of training. The perceived adequacy-of-training score was correlated with the likelihood of engaging in either healthy or unhealthy coping responses when faced with feelings of sexual attraction. The perceived conditions of training do not appear to affect the coping responses used by pastors when faced with feelings of sexual attraction toward parishioners. No significant Pearson product-moment correlation was found between perceived conditions of training and the use of either healthy coping responses ($r = .091$; $n = 345$; $p = .09$) or those deemed as not healthy by our expert judges ($r = .01$; $n = 358$; $p = .83$) when faced with feelings of sexual attraction.

DISCUSSION

Information to Celebrate

Sexual Boundary Violations

Seminary alumni responding to this survey reported a surprisingly low incidence of engaging in sexual intimacies with parishioners (1%), despite how they

perceived the adequacy of their seminary training. Clearly, this finding is cause for celebration in the face of previous research suggesting a more ominous trend of clergy sexual misconduct. However, the incidence rate is so low compared with previous data that it frankly left us quite puzzled. It may be that amplified media attention and increased willingness of denominations and seminaries to acknowledge the need for training and accountability have contributed to the apparent decline in gross sexual boundary violations by clergy. If this is so, these factors should be investigated more thoroughly to determine how they are in fact perceived and utilized by clergy as they attempt to manage issues surrounding sexual temptation. Another possibility is that the usual limitations of survey research contributed to the apparent decline, including underreporting and the possibility that the 57% who did not return their surveys differ in significant ways from the 43% who did. In addition, the present survey was different from some previous research in three perhaps significant ways. First, the present survey was conducted in conjunction with the seminaries from which respondents graduated. Alumni received a cover letter directly from their seminary imploring their participation. Whether this contributed to underreporting or more accurate reporting is unclear. However, the possibility that it contributed to underreporting must be considered because many clergy fear reprisal for acknowledging personal problems or seeking out counseling (Meek et al., in press; see also Francis & Turner, 1995; Goetz, 1992; Hart, McBurney, Palmberg, & Seamands, 1988). Second, the present survey asked participants a very specific question (“Have you ever engaged in sexual intimacies with a parishioner?”) whereas previous research asked much broader questions (i.e., “Since you’ve been in local church ministry, have you ever done anything with someone [not your spouse] that you feel was sexually inappropriate?”) (Muck, 1988). Evidence of sexual boundary violations among our sample increases when considering less severe transgressions (i.e., expressing sexual attraction, kissing a parishioner). Finally, much of the previous research has been a more general look at clergy, predominantly drawing samples from mainline denominations. In contrast, we looked at clergy who graduated from evangelical seminaries, which are typically much more conservative. It is possible that evangelical clergy are different than their mainline counterparts regarding sexuality beliefs and behaviors, or that these particular seminaries are recruiting a highly moral subset of students.

Regardless, the present research suggests that the overwhelming majority of clergy respondents appear to be refraining from gross unethical behavior. This is good news and needs to be acknowledged and celebrated. Pastors are likely wary of even discussing the issue given the national media attention and the strain that that places on all members of a profession that is considered suspect. Perhaps the focus can now turn to more effectively preparing pastors to care for themselves and others as they engage in emotionally challenging work. It is assumed that a clergy member who is confident and comfortable exploring uncomfortable feelings with others, particularly when they are related to his or her own pastoral interactions,

will place those who come for counsel when experiencing personal or familial distress at a strong advantage (see Conklin, 2002).

Respect of Faculty

Despite the low to modest ratings that respondents gave their seminaries in creating an optimal training environment in which to discuss issues of sexuality and sexual health, the degree to which respondents respected the sexual values and conduct of their faculty was high. This is also information to celebrate as faculty will be the primary shapers of sexuality education in the future. Respected faculty who choose to create an open learning environment and share and model effective coping strategies are likely to embolden clergy-in-training to appreciate themselves as sexual beings, to learn to recognize their own needs, and to engage in positive coping strategies when confronted with sexual feelings. Knowing the extent to which they are respected may strengthen faculty to recognize and not fear the fact that they are looked to for guidance. Publicly acknowledging this fact, and utilizing it for good, can also decrease the isolation that current faculty persons experience, especially those with a commitment to seeing seminaries change (Center for Sexuality and Religion [CSR], 2002).

Information That Raises Concern

Training Curriculum

The present research is consistent with previous assessments of seminary sexuality education. Conklin (2002) obtained information from 69 nationally accredited graduate level seminaries and theological schools (a 30% response rate), and found that while only 47% offered a stand-alone sexuality course, 85% reported addressing sexuality by embedding it within other seminary courses. Not surprisingly, current respondents reported taking very few courses solely devoted to issues of human sexuality while in seminary, yet indicated reading books and articles about sexuality and sexual boundaries. Either seminary students are taking it upon themselves to augment their education with additional reading materials on their own, or the seminaries are embedding sexuality training within other courses. While these data are encouraging in suggesting that the topic is not entirely shrouded in silence, they still raise concern. While students may be exposed to specific issues or problem areas involving sexuality in ministry (i.e., maintaining appropriate cross-gender boundaries), they may not have the opportunity to explore how a healthy sexuality informs how they relate to others in a manner that is neither fearfully constricted nor ignorantly naïve.

Not surprisingly, the manner in which sexuality education is addressed in seminary training appears to repeat itself following graduation. Whereas very few

respondents reported attending workshops or seminars about human sexuality post-seminary, they are attempting to further their education and presumably understand and protect themselves better by reading books and articles about sexuality and sexual boundaries on their own. This raises concern in that it again points to a more private manner of education, which may indicate feelings of guilt, shame, uncertainty, and fear of reprisal about a topic that is likely universally experienced but not often discussed.

While the discussion of course content is important as it speaks to issues of intellectual formation and sets the stage for specific classroom teaching and the enhancement of curricula, perhaps what is even more important is the seeming absence of what might be called the human formation component of sexuality education (CSR, 2002).

Training Environment

It is assumed in any helping profession that the mastery of information, though vital, is not sufficient for preparing people to enter into what is often emotionally taxing and highly personal work. Solely relying on curriculum targeting information about healthy human sexuality, albeit an important beginning, will likely prove to be as transformative as the dry facts written in a medical text about the chromosomal differences that distinguish the human male from the female. In contrast, a rich and open atmosphere conducive to 1) delving into how sexuality plays out in actual relationships, 2) openly addressing issues of character formation, 3) increasing self-awareness, and 4) communicating the importance of developing and maintaining accountable relationships is presumed to be an essential component of training. The Center of Sexuality and Religion (2002) summarizes this point succinctly, “The major objective of human formation is deepening insight, motivating guided self-reflection, understanding the role of sexuality in the human experience, and providing guidance in a deeply personal way” (p. vi).

According to our respondents, their professors and advisors were not likely to either share their own personal struggles and experiences in managing sexual feelings, or encourage students to be frank, honest, and open in exploring these thoughts and feelings within their classroom communities. Even more telling was the perceived lack of defining and understanding the impact of sexual harassment, the personal and professional consequences of engaging in sexual contact with a parishioner, and the devastating effects such contact has on the parishioner as well as the community.

Why this is particularly important for pastors, perhaps even more so than for other helping professionals, is the fact that pastors often fulfill multiple roles among their parishioners. Parishioners commonly view their pastors as teachers, counselors, and personal friends at the same time, creating a constant state of change within any given clergy-parishioner relationship. Conceivably, pastors may

find themselves counseling someone with whom they have shared a mutually reinforcing friendship in the past, potentially increasing the level of intimacy and intensity. Clearly, addressing these blurry boundaries in as real and personal manner as possible is an essential component of prevention.

Pastors and the Risk of Denying Sexual Feelings

Half of our respondents reported it is unethical to experience sexual attraction toward a parishioner and over a third deny ever having experienced it in their ministries. When compared with doctoral level psychologists, these data are remarkably divergent (see Table 2). However, when compared with other Christians functioning as lay helpers and counselors, the data is less striking. Among Christian counselors with no graduate degree, 75% reported believing that sexual attraction to clients is always unethical. This percentage dropped to 57% among unlicensed Christian counselors with graduate training, 44% among licensed Christian counselors with master's degrees, and 26% among Christian psychologists (Case et al., 1997). Case, McMinn, and Meek (1997) were concerned that the moral standards to which many Christians subscribe may make it more difficult for them to distinguish between sexual attraction and sexual exploitation, and therefore make them less likely to identify and admit to sexual feelings when they occur. Fortunately, it appears as though increased formal education and training leads people to be more likely to recognize and accept sexual feelings and experiences as normative. So, is it likely that increased attention and training for seminary students will close the gap between pastors and other helping professionals regarding their beliefs and behaviors with regard to sexual feelings and thus decrease their risk of engaging in boundary violations or other personal errors? The above data, combined with our qualitative data suggest that this is likely to be the case. It appears that many pastors are genuinely confused about basic definitions. Respondents wrote comments such as: "We never really talked about this in seminary, at least not openly. We heard a few lectures that basically said, 'don't do anything' but there is a lot more to it when you are actually in ministry"; "I would have liked a definition of 'sexual attraction'; "Being sexually attracted to a church attendee/engaging in sexual fantasy about a church attendee needs definition: thoughts that enter mind (yes), consistently dwelling on it (no)"; "It is hard to say that I even really understand where the line is drawn or where the issue is most clear about what defines an 'inappropriate' relationship."

Coping Responses

Perceived adequacy of training does not appear to affect the likelihood of engaging in healthy coping responses when faced with sexual feelings. There

are at least two hypotheses for this finding. First, only those respondents who acknowledged ever having experienced sexual attraction toward a parishioner were asked to indicate their coping responses, thereby eliminating 60% of the total respondents. Second, on average, the perceived adequacy-of-training score was quite low. The overall mean for the 17 conditions was 2.5, meaning that participants rated the conditions as being between “not at all present” (score of 1) to “somewhat present” (score of 3). Implied is that a positive training environment will naturally lend itself to comfort in acknowledging and positively managing sexual feelings when they arise (see Meek & McMinn, 1999), and because so few experienced a positive training environment (with regard to this issue), it is not surprising that the respondents were unsure about how to cope with a feeling they experienced as being shrouded in silence.

The manner in which pastors tend to cope with feelings of sexual attraction toward parishioners is another area of concern. It appears clergy tend to rely upon themselves to cope with these feelings, reflecting on their religious beliefs or moral standards to discourage sexual feelings and thoughts. They also focus on the negative consequences that acting out on such behavior might bring. While these coping strategies are healthy and appropriate, they may prove inadequate when employed as the sole form of defense. According to our panel of experts, discussing feelings of sexual attraction with an advisor or counselor is universally thought to be healthy, yet this option received one of the lowest overall means among our respondents. While it is often difficult for pastors to find others with whom to share personal struggles, those who are willing to reach out and get help may be the best prepared to deal with the challenges of sexual temptation. Clergy who graduate from seminary training programs that encourage their students to utilize a variety of healthy coping strategies may be the best prepared to deal with the challenges of sexual temptation.

IMPLICATIONS

Although this was initial research into the perceived effectiveness of existing training attempts in preparing seminary students to manage sexual feelings toward parishioners, we believe it provides valuable information for educators. First, it appears that the vast majority of evangelical clergy are refraining from gross ethical misconduct, which is very good news. Perhaps this is related to the fact that the Church and its training bodies are responding to the problem of clergy sexual misconduct. Individual denominations are establishing policies and codes of ethics, sponsoring national and regional conferences and forming task forces in order to address the issue. For example, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church made a commitment in 1996 “to focus on sexual misconduct within the church and take action to address this brokenness and pain within the

United Methodist Church” (<http://gcsr.org/news/gc200/legislation8.htm>). They have done so by developing strategies for prevention, education, intervention, and healing (i.e., seminary curriculum enhancement, sexual misconduct policy revisions, continuing educational components/workshops). Other denominations have also responded by requiring a certain number of hours of initial training on issues of sexual harassment and abuse for all their clergy and employees.

A number of interreligious and/or interdenominational resources for prevention of clergy sexual misconduct have also been established. For example, the Committee on Sexual Exploitation within the Religious Community of the Minnesota Council of Churches exists to end sexual exploitation both by intervention in current cases and by prevention of future instances (<http://www.mnchurches.org/csm/index.html>). This is primarily done by raising awareness of sexual misconduct, providing educational opportunities for clergy and congregations, and offering information and referrals to victims. Many promising training materials to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation have been developed and reported (for a thorough review see Shoener’s 1999 article in the *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*).

Second, though these trends are undoubtedly promising, the present research suggests that those involved in training clergy would be wise to consider improving the overall training environment as it relates to issues of human sexuality. Creating safe spaces in seminary training to facilitate openness, risk-taking, and participation in dialogue about questions related to human sexuality should decrease the risk of the future pastors’ denying sexual feelings. Ideally, the dialogue will also provide them with tools for appropriately dealing with these feelings when they arise. The fact that respondents reported a more private, self-reflective manner of coping rather than seeking out consultation and/or supervision raises concern. Keeping matters private out of a fear of reprisal or diminished esteem can only lead to increased risk for personal maladjustment and professional judgment errors. Respectful accountability offers a much needed safety net for all people engaged in such emotionally charged work. The good news is that the pastors report desiring more open and honest communication about these issues. Examples of responses include: “I was surprised that so much emphasis was placed upon warnings and boundaries, with relatively little formal opportunity or assistance to explore personal realities or experiences related to sexual health and boundaries”; “There needs to be more written on this topic for pastors to study. By God’s grace I have not come close to stumbling, but many of my fellow pastors have fallen. It’s a taboo topic”; “Please make necessary and relevant corrections to the curriculums, we need pastors who can scratch people where they itch, not where we want to itch.”

Third, educators need to know that evangelical seminary respondents report a great deal of respect for their faculty, making the proposed changes and resulting growing pains perhaps more bearable. Having respect for one’s faculty is absolutely

essential, especially when deciding whether or not to enter into vulnerable spaces with both peers and people in authority. In conclusion to their research regarding the perceived training effectiveness of both Christian and secular doctoral level psychology programs, Meek and McMinn (1999) report: “When trustworthy educators with clear values promote ethical thinking and behavior-and encourage students to authentically explore their own experiences and values-students are likely to experience an effective learning environment for managing feelings of sexual attraction” (p. 427). We believe this holds true for seminary students as well.

Finally, seminary educators would be wise to engage in similar types of research in their ongoing self-study efforts. Future research should consider what specifically has decreased the prevalence rates of gross clergy sexual misconduct in recent years. Are there differences between evangelical and mainline seminary graduates with regard to this apparent decline? Other potential differences between evangelical and mainline seminary graduates, such as their sexuality beliefs and behaviors, their perceptions of their training environments, and their utilization of continuing education, could also be explored.

Other research questions abound. For example, what factors contribute to the decision to engage in or refrain from boundary violations for clergy? Is the use of pornography or sexual fantasy considered a risk factor or something that seems to ward off the temptation to cross a professional boundary? How comfortable are educators in addressing these issues openly and what additional training do they need to engage in this task in a respectful and competent manner? Which existing training resources are most effective? What accountability/mentoring relationships need to be in place for clergy to be more willing to seek external guidance when faced with sexual feelings/temptations? Would ongoing supervision/consultation requirements decrease the sense of isolation many pastors feel in their work? Would this affect the nature of their coping response choices? How are pastors defining sexual beliefs and behaviors? For example, what does “experiencing sexual attraction toward a parishioner” mean to a pastor in comparison to “experiencing sexual attraction toward a therapy client” mean to a psychologist?

CONCLUSION

We are encouraged by our findings; it appears that graduates from five evangelical seminaries are at low risk for sexual misconduct. Nonetheless, we have lingering concerns about the openness of the seminary training environments, a tendency for clergy to deny feelings of sexual attraction when they occur, and the inclination to cope with sexual attraction without seeking the support of others. Our hope is that these findings will promote continued dialog among clergy, seminary educators, and mental health professionals.

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