

Discussion Questions for Ethics Week #8: Pastoral Power and the Ethics of Sexual Misconduct

You are the pastor of Centerpointe Community Church in Centerpointe, Michigan. Your church belongs to a small denomination, the Evangelical Alliance, which has thirty local churches in New York and Ohio, but only one other church in western Michigan. This other church, Grace Community Church, is pastored by Michael C., whose father was a highly respected pastor and at one time the national superintendent of the Evangelical Alliance. Although only 36, Michael has displayed remarkable abilities in preaching and church leadership; his congregation has grown rapidly, is relatively affluent and takes great pride in the influence it has within the denomination.

You are in your office working on the Sunday sermon when you receive a call from the national superintendent. He tells you that he has received a complaint from one of the members of Michael's congregation, claiming that Michael had initiated an extramarital sexual relationship with her. The superintendent is overworked and feels that he does not have reliable information about this situation or access to good advice about how to handle it. He remembers that you had worked as a hospital chaplain and were a member of the hospital's ethics committee. "Surely," he says, "you must know something about how to handle complaints about professional ethics and allegations of misconduct." He asks if you would separately interview both Michael and the complainant and offer a preliminary report about the situation and suggestions about how it might be addressed. "I'm in upstate New York, dealing with a messy church split," he says, "but I could fly in on Friday afternoon and we could assess the situation then. Can you help me out with this?" You would like to say no but, given that you are the only other pastor in the denomination who lives in Michigan, you feel compelled to agree.

You phone the complainant, Janet M., and indicate that the national superintendent had asked you to assist him in reviewing her complaint. She faxes you a copy of her letter of complaint and agrees to an interview in your office; you ask your secretary Karen to sit in on the meeting and take notes.

The Complainant's Perspective: Janet is 29 and a devout Christian who had come to Michael for counsel about how to deal with her husband, an older man who is a workaholic and cold, cruel and emotionally abusive. Janet felt isolated and frightened because of her husband's increasingly aggressive and violent behavior. She had greatly appreciated Michael's willingness to calmly listen to her struggles, his gentle, kind manner and his commitment to his ideals. Janet produced a copy of Oswald Chambers' *My Utmost For His Highest* that Michael had given her, with a scripture verse and an encouraging note written inside the front cover. Michael was such an affirming and affectionate contrast to her own husband and she gave him a quick hug before leaving that day. Janet's ability to handle her difficult situation began to improve. At the end of the next week's counseling session, Janet had turned to ask Michael a final question before leaving; to her surprise, he gently placed his hands on her shoulders and kissed her on the forehead. Janet continued:

"I stood there like a statue, stunned, wanting to do or say something but not being able to. After an awkward moment, I mumbled goodbye and left. The next week was a real emotional roller coaster and I alternated between feeling an attraction to Michael and being angry at myself and filled with self-loathing for

having such a feeling. I contemplated filing a complaint with the national superintendent there and then, but I wasn't sure whether I was reading too much into the situation and I certainly didn't want to destroy Michael's career--I had really put him on a pedestal.

During the next counseling session, we were both very subdued and didn't say much. I wanted to talk about what had happened, but I didn't really know what to say. At the end of the session, Michael opened up a bit and apologized for being aloof, admitting that he was depressed about some recent conflict in his marriage and the sense of distance and disconnection that he was feeling. It gave me some insight into Michael as a person, which I had not had before and so I dismissed the previous week's kiss as a one-time event that didn't need further discussion.

Still the next week again was something of a roller coaster and I strongly considered canceling the next counseling appointment. I finally decided not to, because the counseling sessions were really the one bright spot in my week and I desperately needed someone I could talk to about what was going on in my life.

At the end of the next counseling session, while Michael and I were talking, I suddenly realized how close we were standing and the electricity that was in the air between us. Michael placed his hand on the side of my breast, pulled me toward him and kissed me on the lips. I did not pull away. I simply could not move as his hands removed my clothes. He made love to me on the floor of his office, his secretary having gone home early that day. I left in a hurry, with my hair and clothes in a mess. I spent some time in the parking lot in my car, crying hysterically. I felt so used, so cheap. I became so depressed that I could not sleep or function. I just could not go on. After taking an overdose of sleeping pills, I was referred to a psychiatrist, who prescribed anti-depressants and recommended that I consider pressing criminal charges against Michael. I rejected that because I could not face the stress and exposure of going through a criminal trial, but I do feel that Michael needs to be removed from his position before he destroys someone else's life."

The Offender's Perspective: The next day you meet with Michael in his office at Grace Community Church. He is smartly dressed, clearly feels comfortable being on his own turf and initially seems ready to explain himself and put anyone who would support the complainant on the defensive. He welcomes you as a colleague in the ministry and, pointing to a photo on the wall, talks about how he had idolized his father and the image of integrity and authenticity he had projected. Michael admits shamefacedly, "I guess I've let him down."

Becoming a bit more sober, Michael confesses,

"I really blew it. I have always been so concerned about how others see me --living up to my father's reputation. When someone comes to me for help, I feel I need to put everything else aside--social life, personal needs, whatever--to help them. With Janet this was how it started out. It was very hard for me to hear about how her husband treated her and I felt a sense of shame when she left the first counseling session still on the verge of tears. I so badly wanted to make it

right, to defend her. And when she did begin making progress, I was really happy, it was immensely satisfying to see that.

In any case, though, I was a fool to think that I was competent to help anyone with their marriage. Yes, I took a course on this in seminary, but my own marriage has been in a state of collapse for two and a half years now. My wife has become so bitter that she won't even agree to go to marriage counseling anymore. In fact, she's even laid down an ultimatum that if I'm not willing to quit the ministry, she'll serve me with divorce papers! How could I ever quit the ministry?! It's been my whole life, what drives me, and at times the only thing that matters to me.

That situation with my wife was what made me vulnerable when Janet came along. At first I would just look forward to the counseling sessions with Janet but soon I just couldn't stop thinking about her. There was something electrifying about the way that she would step in close to you and flash that smile, that come-hither look--it would have melted wax even on a cold winter's day. That one day when she hugged me unexpectedly, it was like a dam had burst. When I got up in the morning, she would be the first thing I would think about and soon I found that the one thing that really energized me was thinking about how satisfying it would be to be with her.

That one event--yes, it showed really poor judgment, I should have had more self-control and not given in so easily. I should have been wiser and followed the counsel of Solomon in Proverbs, where it says, 'Wisdom will save you from the gaze and embrace of a woman with seductive words.'

Michael leans across the table and concludes with the appeal, "Please help me restore my ministry."

The Superintendent's Perspective: When you meet the superintendent at the airport on Friday afternoon, he looks tired and somewhat defeated. Over dinner he comments:

"I admit that this accusation about Michael came as quite a surprise to me. I've been a friend of his father's for years, before succeeding him as national superintendent. When Michael was at Bible college, he always stood out from the rest, just like his father.

Unless criminal action is in view here--and I gather it is not--it does not seem wise to make this indiscretion public knowledge. As leaders in the Alliance, we have an obligation to protect both the denomination and the local church from scandal. The church would be destroyed if people found out. And as a pastor of pastors, I also have to think about Michael's career too. He is a great asset to our denomination and naturally one would hardly wish to compromise his marriage or his future possibilities for ministry by making this matter public."

Questions For Reflection:

(1) In what specific ways did Michael neglect or violate appropriate professional boundaries?

(a) Specifically where in the case study can one observe these boundary violations?

- (b) Why is Michael's neglect or violation of these customary and expected boundaries a serious problem?
- (c) How are power (=public status, access to emotionally-charged confidential personal information and disproportionate influence upon others) related to the need to strictly maintain clear and predictable professional boundaries?
- (d) Where does the responsibility lie for maintaining appropriate boundaries in a counseling relationship and how does Michael's violation of these boundaries undermine his ability to provide the pastoral care and spiritual direction that are an integral part of the pastoral office?
- (e) Is it possible for an emotionally distressed and/or depressed counselee to give unimpaired consent to a romantic or sexual relationship? If so, when and why? If not, what implications does this have for how the counselee's role in this case is understood?

(2) What ethical responsibilities exist in regard to reporting pastoral sexual misconduct? If the national superintendent is reluctant to deal with this matter, is there an ethical obligation to report Michael's misconduct to other denominational authorities (e.g. the Board of Ministry) or to the lay leaders (elders/deacons) of Michael's church? If so, why? If not, why not?

(3) In your judgment, should Michael be removed from local church ministry? If so, why? If not, why not? Or should he be allowed to continue in his position, but only with certain conditions and restrictions being placed on his work? If so, what should these conditions and restrictions be and why?

(4) Can/should clergy who have been involved in pastoral sexual misconduct be restored to local church ministry? If so, under what conditions and why? What about Michael? How would you evaluate his suitability for future ministry in the local church?

(5) Regardless of whether Michael is removed from his position and/or the ministry, what obligations do denominational officials or others exercising oversight have to inform a congregation about its pastor's sexual misconduct?

(a) Would it be acceptable simply to require Michael quietly to resign, while keeping the reason secret so that everyone can save face?

(b) What if rumors begin to circulate about the reasons for the pastor's resignation, dividing the church into supporters of the pastor and those who are critical of the pastor and feel profoundly betrayed by him? What should the denominational officials disclose and what responsibility do they have to address the turmoil and division in the congregation?

(c) Assuming that Michael resigns or is removed from leadership in the local church, what obligations do denominational officials and the local congregation have toward the new pastor that is invited to lead this congregation? Is there an obligation for denominational officials and/or the congregation to disclose Michael's prior misconduct to the pastor who is hired to replace him? If so, why? If not, why not? Why is this a relevant question?