



We're all adults here...
let's talk.

Dr. Heather T. Banis
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Pre-Assembly Workshop

Accompaniment is the heart of ministry

Trust
Vulnerability
Power
Problems
Healing





Sacred Trust

Trust is at the heart of accompaniment.

Pastoral relationships have defined parameters and associated expectations, rooted in the belief in the dignity of each and every person.

Demonstrate trustworthiness by establishing and respecting healthy boundaries.

When trust is violated, the impact is profound in part because the role of the clergy amplifies the significance of the betrayal.

When framed as “consensual” or “mutual” – between two adults – impact is further obscured and significance is minimized.



Vulnerability

It often begins innocently. But inherent in the power differential of a pastoral relationship is a situation and/or disposition of vulnerability.

“The devastating impact of clergy sexual abuse on adult congregants are far-reaching, affecting their psychological well-being, physical health, relationships with others, and spiritual state, including and especially their relationship with God. Survivors often experience profound trauma, betrayal, and a loss of faith, making it imperative for religious institutions to prioritize prevention, accountability, and support for those affected.”

<https://socialwork.web.baylor.edu/research-impact/research-focus-areas-and-faculty-projects/adult-clergy-sexual-abuse-advocacy>



Power

“The psychological impact of Spiritual Harm is identified as causing indescribable pain that may confuse and psychologically overwhelm the individual, rendering them incapable of processing the sexual abuse [8,29].

Furthermore, it has serious impacts on a person’s agency, wellbeing [32] and long-term health outcomes [33]. Often, survivors of abuse were prevented from disclosing their abuse for a prolonged period because of fear of repercussions, guilt or shame [8,29]. Left without coping strategies and protective mechanisms otherwise available to them [8,29,37], survivors of abuse may engage in maladaptive coping strategies to survive [36]. These can include avoidance and dissociative behaviours [30], risky sexual behaviours [15,36], substance use and misuse [15], self-injurious behaviours [36] or suicidality [15,33].”

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12002452/>

“The scars are written on my soul.”

J. Simpson

Impact of sexual misconduct

Shame, isolation & guilt

- Scandal and scapegoating
- Profound shame
- Withdrawal
- Burden of responsibility for destroying a “good priest”
- Pre-existing issues, patterns, fears, misconceptions are exacerbated or triggered

Loss and grief

- Sense of self altered
- Loss of dignity
- Community
- Capacity to trust others
- Capacity to trust one’s own judgment
- Loss of relationships, including relationship with clergy person and God

Clinical symptoms/diagnoses

- Depression
 - Anger
 - Suicidality
- Anxiety
 - Avoidance
 - Withdrawal
- PTSD
 - Dissociation
- Personality disorders
- Substance use
- Concrete thinking; decreased insight
- Sexual dysfunction
- Trouble with boundaries

Research findings:

- “When pastoral authority overrides agency, the result is significant trauma” (Flynn, 2003).
- “Research consistently demonstrates that adult survivors of clergy abuse experience complex and enduring harms, including spiritual devastation, psychological trauma, sexual dysfunction, relational breakdowns, and socio-economic impacts, which mirror those observed in survivors of incest and intimate partner violence” (Flynn, 2003; Garland, 2006; Kennedy, 2009; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022
- “Common symptoms include shame, isolation, self-blame, denial, poor self-esteem, suicidal ideation, and disconnection from self and others” (Flynn, 2003; Kennedy, 2009; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022).
- Quotes taken from article by J. Simpson

Research findings continued:

“...significant psychological, emotional, physical, sexual, and financial consequences, including diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, suicidality, substance use, and relational breakdown” ([Bagwell-Gray et al., 2015](#); [Townsend et al., 2022](#); [Vitek & Yeater, 2021](#)).

“...spiritual crises, loss of faith, shame, institutional betrayal, and community ostracism ([Blakemore et al., 2017](#); [Kennedy, 2009](#); [Moncrief-Stuart & Pooler, 2025](#); [Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022](#); [Pooler & Droesch, 2025](#); [Smith & Freyd, 2014](#)).

Institutional power, theological messaging, the pastoral care relationship, and the moral authority of the perpetrator create conditions for ongoing coercion and silence ([Garland, 2006](#); [Leimgruber, 2022](#)).



Problems

Scandal

Disruption

Embarrassment

Accountability

Far-reaching repercussions

Polarizing in community

Restoration – who's staying, who's going?

Trauma-informed perspective prioritizes:

- Dignity
- Safety
- Vulnerability possible in every person and/or all situations
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Intentionality in leadership; establish and maintain boundaries
- Facilitate peer support; collaborate to distribute power; seek consultation
- Recognize and understand survival behaviors
- Impact – profound/overwhelming
- Seek priest over mental health provider
- Understanding of the role of power and shame
- Acknowledgement and accountability



Healing

Acknowledgement

Accountability

Outcome of reporting process

Therapy

Spiritual direction

Self-compassion

Forgiveness

Gratefully...

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