



Many Women Targeted by Faith Leaders, Survey Says

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One in every 33 women who attend worship services regularly has been the target of sexual advances by a religious leader, a survey released Wednesday says.

The study, by Baylor University researchers, found that the problem is so pervasive that it almost certainly involves a wide range of denominations, religious traditions and leaders.

"It certainly is prevalent, and clearly the problem is more than simply a few charismatic leaders preying on vulnerable followers," said Diana Garland, dean of Baylor's School of Social Work, who co-authored [the study](#).

It found that more than two-thirds of the offenders were married to someone else at the time of the advance.

Carolyn Waterstradt, 42, a graduate student who lives in the Midwest, said she was coerced into a sexual relationship with a married minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for 18 months. He had been her pastor for a decade, she said, and told her the relationship was ordained by God.

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"I believed him because I was looking for direction and for help," said Waterstradt, who ended the relationship years ago and entered therapy. The pastor was removed from the clergy.

Waterstradt said she has suffered lasting psychological and spiritual consequences from the relationship, including depression and a deep distrust of organized religion. "It's very difficult for me to walk into a church," she said.

A growing number of denominations are moving to do something about such problems, particularly since the [Catholic Church's highly publicized sex scandal](#) involving its clergy.

At least 36 denominations have policies that identify sexual relations between adult congregants and clergy as misconduct, subject to discipline.

The Rabbinical Assembly, the international association of Conservative rabbis, uses investigating panels to look into complaints against rabbis. It notes that the "power imbalance between clergy and those to whom they minister makes it clear that sexual contacts in these situations are by definition non-consensual."

In the United Church of Christ, ministers must attend a workshop on clergy sexual abuse every three years, and those seeking jobs in the ministry must have their names checked against government sex offender lists, said the Rev. J. Bennett Guess, spokesman for the 1.2 million-member denomination.

Locally, the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia requires clergy members, other employees and volunteers to receive training in prevention of adult sexual misconduct and prevention of child abuse, spokesman Henry Burt said.

The diocese "takes very seriously its obligation to make its churches and institutions safe places for children and adults to grow in their faith in the church," Burt said.

Lawmakers are also taking note. Clergy sexual misconduct is illegal in Minnesota and Texas. Texas law, for example, defines clergy sexual behavior as sexual assault if the religious leader "causes the other person to submit or participate by exploiting the other person's emotional dependency on the clergyman in the clergyman's professional character as spiritual adviser."

For its study, Baylor used the 2008 General Social Survey, a nationally representative sample of 3,559 respondents, to estimate the prevalence of clergy sexual misconduct. Women older than 18 who attended worship services at least once a month were asked in the survey whether they had received "sexual advances or propositions" from a religious leader.

The study found that close to one in 10 respondents -- male and female -- reported having known about clergy sexual misconduct occurring in a congregation they had attended.

Researchers say they don't know whether the incidence of clergy sexual misconduct had changed over the years. Nor do they know whether sexual wrongdoing by clergy is more, or less, frequent than in other well-respected professions.

But, Garland said, "when you put it with a spiritual leader or moral leader, you've really added a power that we typically don't think about in secular society -- which is that this person speaks for God and interprets God for people. And that really adds a power."