

A large, expressive blue brushstroke graphic that sweeps across the top and right side of the cover, partially obscuring the title.

IN THE PARISH

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& Ronald G. Barton

Sex in the Parish

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This volume is dedicated to all those pastors and laypeople who shared with us their stories of pain and struggle, joy and hope.

Sex in the Parish grows out of the work of the Professional Ethics Group of the Center for Ethics and Social Policy at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. This phase of our work was supported by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. For reviewing materials and sustaining our spirits during the process, we thank John Landgraf, Fumitaka Matsuoka, Lynn N. Rhodes, Harlan Stelmach, Barbara Brown Zikmund, and especially Maura Tucker, whose indefatigable humor and constant wisdom were a godsend.

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Sex in the Parish

Introduction: The Sexual Puzzle

This is a book about sex. Specifically, it is about sex in the parish—about pastors and parishioners, about how pastors handle their sexuality in general, and about what they do in particular when they find themselves sexually attracted to a parishioner. Above all, it is about whether sexual intimacy between pastor and parishioner is wrong, and if so, what makes it wrong.

Sex is one of the most joyful, powerful, celebrated, and yet confusing aspects of human life. It is mysterious and humbling. It is also common and ordinary and everyday. Precisely because we experience sexuality in complex ways, we are often confused and uncertain about its meaning, its place in our lives, and what to do about our sexual feelings and desires.

CONFUSION

This confusion affects pastors as well as others. One pastor admitted:

I am often confused and fearful as to how to express my sexuality in a healthy manner inside or outside the parish. This is probably the number one theological/practical issue I'm faced with as a parish minister.

This statement demonstrates what we have found to be altogether too common: clergy are struggling with various aspects of their sexuality and what it means to be a sexual person in a public role such as ministry.

For some, the regulation of sexual conduct may be plain and simple. Sexual ethics seem straightforward and clear-cut: "Be monogamous." "Celibacy in singleness, fidelity in marriage." We have heard these maxims from many. But for others, ethical issues involving sexuality are complex and answers are uncertain. The pastor quoted above expresses this sense of complexity and uncertainty. She speaks of being confused and fearful.

She is not alone. In our surveys of pastors, male and female, young and old, rural and urban, southern, northern, eastern, and western, we have found that many pastors struggle with their sexuality and with their theology of sexuality. While sexuality and its role and meaning may be clear for some, for others it is not.

In our view, the fact that sexuality is confusing for many is not in itself a bad sign. Simple aphorisms such as "be monogamous" or "celibacy in singleness, fidelity in marriage" may have their place, but they also do not cover all the realities and complexities of human life, including life in the parish. In spite of—or perhaps because of—the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s, church people and leaders are not clear about roles, rules, possibilities, and limits in the sexual arena.

The confusion is partly about what behavior is acceptable. Is it permissible for the pastor who is single to date a parishioner? What about dating other staff in the church? As long as both parties are "consenting adults," is anything wrong? If something is wrong, what is it? Is it only adultery that makes sexual contact wrong? Is sexual attraction itself

wrong, or is it wrong only if acted upon? There has been precious little attention to such issues in the literature on professional ethics.

Some years ago, Charles Rassieur published a book about clergy sexual ethics under the title, *The Problem Clergymen Don't Talk About*.¹ He was right: sexual ethics has not been much discussed in the literature on clergy. In recent years, several books have plunged boldly into the topic. *Ministry and Sexuality*, by G. Lloyd Rediger, is a compendium of cases drawn from his counseling experience with clergy.² Rediger offers examples of pastors involved in pedophilia, rape, transvestism, sexual harassment, and a range of other problems. *Is Nothing Sacred?* by Marie Fortune details a case in which five parishioners and a clergy colleague made allegations of sexual misconduct on the part of "Rev. Peter Donovan."³ These are the only full-length treatments specifically devoted to the question of clergy sexual ethics, although Peter Rutter's *Sex in the Forbidden Zone* is intended to apply to clergy as well as to other professionals.⁴

Some of the literature dealing with sexual ethics for clergy assumes flatly that sex between pastor and parishioner is always wrong. Peter Rutter declares that any professional-client relationship of trust constitutes a "forbidden zone" in which sexual contact is unethical. Charles Rassieur is only slightly less guarded, assuming that "the professional dimension generally implies that there are certain limits to the degree of intimacy the professional relationship will allow."⁵ Marie Fortune argues forcefully that Rev. Peter Donovan's actions were wrong, but, as we shall see in chapter 5, it is not clear whether her argument would constitute a blanket prohibition in other situations.

Most of us know pastors who have married a former parishioner and whose marriages are as "graced"

as any we know. This would seem to undermine any assumption that ministry simply constitutes a forbidden zone in which all romantic or sexual interest is wrong. We concur with Rutter that 90 percent of relationships that begin in the forbidden zone will die in a short time because they are based not on genuine love but on projections growing out of the context in which the partners met. Nonetheless, some of these relationships do not die. How do we explain the possibility of a genuinely loving relationship? Are marriages wrong if they began with a relationship in a forbidden zone? Is there some way to understand both the dangers of sexual interest between professionals and their clients, and also the possibilities for ethical sexual contact? These are the questions to be addressed in this book.

The confusion about sexual ethics is not merely a confusion about behavior. Part of the confusion that pastors and others feel today arises from the fact that we define sexuality more broadly today than we once did. "Sex" used to mean a rather narrow range of behavior—specifically, genital behavior or behavior that was presumed to lead toward the genital. Today, when people talk about sex or sexuality, they often mean something larger: our entire way of being as male or female in the world.

THEOLOGY AND SEXUALITY

This broader perspective reflects a deeper issue at stake: what *theology* informs sexual ethics? How do pastors understand who God is and how God operates in the world? How does this understanding affect the decisions they make on a daily basis? Some years ago, Rassieur cautioned that "every task performed by a pastor is a theological task" and that pastors

ignore the theological dimensions at their own peril.⁶ For the pastor quoted above, sexuality is not just a practical issue but a theological issue. She sees correctly that confusions about sexual feelings and behavior often reflect confusions about how to understand God and what God is doing in human life. What we think is acceptable sexual conduct depends in part on how we define sexuality, and this in turn depends on how we understand God and God's creation.

Although clergy are trained theologically and spend much of their lives reflecting on the theological meaning of human life in all its dimensions, this does not guarantee that they will have a clear theological perspective on sexuality. One pastor lamented, "My theology of sexuality is in little pieces, like pieces of a puzzle that I haven't yet put together." This pastor may in fact behave very ethically. But she nonetheless reflects many pastors' struggle to articulate the *grounds* for that behavior, to find an adequate theology of sexuality.

For both these women pastors, and for other male and female pastors as well, sexuality is not just a practical issue; it is a theological issue. And it is a theological issue that is not yet resolved. It is like "pieces of a puzzle" that are not yet put together.

THE STUDY

This book is an exploration of that puzzle. It is the outgrowth of a four-year study of intimacy in the parish by the Professional Ethics Group of the Center for Ethics and Social Policy at the Graduate Theological Union. Part of that study focused on issues of sexual ethics. We began our study before the public revelations of the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert cases. Our concern was not just for sexual abuse in the

parish, but also for healthy sexuality—how to create it, nourish it, express it.

In order to explore a range of experiences and expressions of sexuality in the parish, we conducted several informal surveys of pastors and lay people across the country. In one survey, we created six “vignettes” dealing with hypothetical ethical dilemmas about sexual behavior. These vignettes were shared with over two hundred pastors from around the country and have been incorporated into a videotape on clergy sexual ethics.⁷ We asked pastors and lay people to respond to the vignettes, telling us what they thought ought to be done and why. These vignettes gave us some sense of how pastors would respond to a variety of possible situations of pastoral attraction to parishioners and co-workers in the parish.

A second survey instrument was a questionnaire sent to pastors around the country, asking them to respond to ten questions about their experience of sex in the parish. The survey was small and not intended to be scientifically controlled. It is therefore only suggestive of the range of problems and issues that pastors face as well as of the resources that they bring to those issues. We make no claims to speak for or represent all pastors. Moreover, our sampling was largely Protestant, mainline, and Caucasian and therefore does not tell us much about ministry among other groups.

Nonetheless, our respondents included men and women; gay, lesbian, and bisexual pastors; older and younger pastors, some with many years of experience and some newer to the parish; and pastors from Maine to New Mexico, from Georgia to Oregon. In short, while our sample was small, it does give us a preliminary picture of “sex in the parish” as it is experienced by a sampling of ministers from around

the United States. In addition, we tested our preliminary findings with groups of pastors around the country and found that the experiences and insights we describe here “ring true” to a range of practicing pastors.

Finally, we conducted in-depth interviews with more than twenty pastors who agreed to share their histories and stories with us. We asked them to tell us something of their sexual history and to explore the questions they have. We heard stories of pain and promise, of joy and heartbreak, of problems resolved and of potential problems ahead. These stories form the third source for the reflections we offer in this volume. While none of the stories will be told in its entirety here, the value of stories is that they put particular dilemmas or issues into a larger context that is often revealing of an underlying ethical framework.

When we put together the data from these sources, what we find overall is not unlike the pastor’s claim that she is dealing with pieces of a puzzle. The data look like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, with bulges here and notches there. Sometimes they look as though they should fit together and then elude our efforts to make them do so. Few have straight edges or sharp corners. Our task in this volume will be to piece them together into a coherent picture, to make them “fit” in some way. The effort to do so will also illumine some missing pieces on which more research is needed.

As we go, we will reflect on the difficulties in finding the contiguous pieces, and on the shape of the puzzle that finally emerges. Some pastors are still struggling to find the edge pieces and boundaries, so that they may know even the broadest configuration of what the puzzle looks like. They remain confused and seeking. For others, the pieces are fitting together and the puzzle is taking shape. Their theology of sexuality is being formed. Both the joy and the strug-

gle that pastors experience in dealing with sexuality must be comprehended if the puzzle is to be pieced together.

Our goal is ethical analysis. We want to suggest what is right and wrong for pastors in their sexual behavior. But we want that analysis to be adequate to the task. Sexuality is a complicated arena of human life. Ministry is a complicated context. No ethical analysis of an issue is adequate if it fails to take seriously the real-life struggles and dilemmas of those who encounter the issue in their everyday lives and the learning that results. We therefore take seriously what our pastors have said about and done with their sexuality. In order to deal with this complicated arena in a complicated context, there is no substitute for firsthand experience.

At the same time, no ethical analysis is adequate if it fails to provide perspective on what people say and do. Experience may give raw data, but it does not provide final answers. Two pastors facing similar situations might choose differently. Which choice is correct? Is it possible that both could be right? In order to answer these questions, we have to go beyond the actual choices and the feelings and hunches on which they may have been based, and offer some grounds for arguing that one choice is better than the other.

THE PLAN

In order to do that, we will be adding pieces to our puzzle as we go. We will begin in chapter 1 by looking at the good gift of sexuality and at some of its special vulnerabilities and joys as those are experienced in the parish. Here, we largely let pastors speak for themselves, though we also take note of how their insights are corroborated in some of the theological literature on sexuality.