A cautionary tale: Church struggles to help clergy who have fallen

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A pastor is exposed for sexual sin. Very soon, he loses his job, his ordination and often his family. He may even go to jail. From the standpoint of the church, he’s quickly removed from the pulpit and most likely never heard from again.

Is this a situation beyond God’s power for redemption? Even if the pastor never returns to the pulpit, is there a way for Christians to extend forgiveness, compassion and even reconciliation to sex offenders?

Steve Richardson, former pastor of First United Methodist Church in Royse City, Texas, hopes some lessons might be gleaned from his story. In June 2009, he was sentenced to 17 years in federal prison after pleading guilty to two child pornography offenses. He responded to questions posed by the Reporter in a letter from the Federal Correctional Institution in Bastrop, Texas.

“My darkest secrets became a media event,” Mr. Richardson wrote. “Everyone knows what I did, and I don’t want to hide or pretend it didn’t happen. But I think God wants to use my story to help others.”

Zero tolerance

In recent years, many churches have adopted “zero tolerance” policies regarding sexual abuse, harassment and misconduct. Some, however, are beginning to look for ways to extend mercy toward sex offenders as well as those who struggle with sexual addictions.

A new United Methodist Web site, www.umsexailethics.org, which debuted in November, provides information not only for victims of sexual misconduct but also to those accused of misconduct or confused about what constitutes inappropriate behavior.

“If we can create an institutional environment where people can talk about these issues, we’ll be healthier for that,” said the Rev. Darryl Stephens, an executive with the United Methodist Commission on the Status and Role of Women (COSROW) in Chicago.

The United Methodist Church considers sexual misconduct “a betrayal of sacred trust” and defines misconduct as “unwanted sexual or gender-directed behaviors by either a lay or clergy person within a ministerial relationship.” Such behaviors can range from child abuse and rape to sexual harassment to stalking to the use of pornography.

Pornography is an area where Mr. Stephens believes many clergy could be vulnerable, thanks to what he calls the “triple As” created by the Internet: affordable, anonymous and accessible. Because online pornography is so readily available, he says, more people will be tempted to look at it—and some may become addicted.

“Statistics show that a large number of clergy of all denominations are currently accessing Internet pornography,” said Mr. Stephens. “This is not an isolated problem limited to one or two individuals.”

The sexual ethics Web site quotes section 2082 of the denomination’s 2008 Book of Resolutions: “A disturbing trend in the Church is the use of pornography by clergy and lay employees and volunteers, even using computers and other equipment owned by or housed within churches and church-related organizations. We are aware of reports of adults sharing pornographic materials with children and youth during church activities, camps, or programs."
"But beyond being saddened, shocked, and dismayed by these reports, how do we raise awareness among congregational, conference, agency, school or cabinet leaders, and what do we do to identify, stop, prevent, and then heal from recurrence in our communities of faith?"

**Worst-case scenario**

While some persons may occasionally indulge in adult pornography, only a few are tempted to do what Steve Richardson did: look at images of child pornography.

In documents filed in court, Mr. Richardson admitted to exchanging child pornography online. In December 2007, he communicated over the Internet with an undercover federal agent, sending an image of child pornography and requesting more images.

On Sept. 24, 2008, agents seized a desktop computer from Mr. Richardson’s office at the church that contained images of child pornography. Mr. Richardson possessed more than 600 images of child pornography—including sadistic, masochistic or other violent images involving minors.

He will serve at least 15 years in prison. His wife divorced him and he is unable to visit his three children. He had to surrender his ordination credentials, and has relinquished all of his possessions and his clergy pension.

After his release, Mr. Richardson will serve a lifetime of supervised release and must register as a sex offender.

"At times, the loss has been overwhelming," Mr. Richardson wrote. But he admits, "Had someone viewed illicit pictures of my children, I might be pushing for a harsher sentence."

**Richardson’s tale**

So how did a man of God become involved with something so vile as child pornography?

The Rev. John McLarty, a pastor in the North Texas Conference and a friend of Mr. Richardson, said he saw no hints of an addiction or any kind of secrets before the arrest.

“Shocking doesn’t even begin to describe how this experience has been,” Mr. McLarty said. “For the first few days following Steve’s arrest, I just walked around in a daze.”

Mr. Richardson said that while he loved the ministry, he also faced periods of “spiritual trials and isolation.”

“I still find it hard to believe how far into sin I fell,” he wrote.

“I felt tremendous guilt and remorse so I would pray for the strength to overcome and repent. I would enjoy periods of abstinence from online pornography, yet the temptation would always remain. Eventually a weak moment would come and I would fall back into sin. Each time I fell, the cravings would become more dark and the addiction would grow.”

A year before his arrest, Mr. Richardson sought help at an online Christian-based pornography addiction program. While it was helpful, he says he was not fully honest in the program and did not tell his wife or anyone else about his addiction.

“Today I realize that no matter how much I cried and prayed, freedom from my online sexual addiction was not going to be achieved in my case until I fully trusted someone to help me,” he wrote.
"I should have never allowed even the smallest amount of adult pornography in my life. I had no idea, though, that it would ever grow to the point of including such vile images as child pornography. At the point it became illegal, I was majorly addicted and it was a compulsion."

Here’s where the church might offer assistance, says Mr. Stephens: giving United Methodist pastors somewhere to turn when porn or other sexual sin becomes a problem.

“Our church still has a lot of work to do, to get help to clergy having issues of intimacy and sexuality,” Mr. Stephens said. “It’s hard for a pastor to find a place to go to talk confidentially about this issue. He can’t go to someone in his congregation. He can’t turn to a colleague, because that colleague could be his district superintendent next year.”

Mr. Richardson believes the church could also take some steps such as requiring monitoring and blocking software for all church computers.

“It could be a part of our safe sanctuaries policy,” Mr. Richardson writes. “I know that in my case it would have made a tremendous difference.”

Mr. Richardson reports that while some have not yet chosen to forgive him, a few church members and friends have extended grace to him and to his family.

“I have been truly amazed and blessed by how many people who have reached out to me with love, grace and encouragement,” he said. “Clergy that I barely knew, including those involved in the removal of my ordination, have written me with words of grace and hope. I have received countless letters from previous church members. They have been a source of strength for me during these dark and difficult times.”

Mr. McLarty has stayed in touch and even sought Mr. Richardson’s input for a sermon on the dangers of sex addiction. In the sermon, Mr. McLarty spoke of the need to stay accountable to others.

“By daring to talk about our struggles openly with people that we trust, we keep a light shining on those darker places of our world,” he said in the sermon. “I will keep praying for him every day, that he never forgets that he still belongs to a God who created all of us.”

Mr. Richardson says he prays that God will use his fall to help others. To pastors who might be fighting a porn addiction, he offers some sober advice: “Don’t try to fight sin on your own. Get help. Seek out mature men or women of faith whom you can trust.

“Let the body of Christ minister to you. You need not confess to the world but seek someone to make this journey by your side. Get professional help. There are specialized doctors and therapists that have proven results.”

### Church’s response

The larger question for the church that professes the power of redemption and forgiveness is not an easy one: Is there any room for compassion or mercy in a story as disturbing as Mr. Richardson’s?

Psychologists point to growing evidence that pornography’s effect on brain chemistry can be similar to alcohol addiction, and just as difficult to fight.

“Pornography is like cocaine for some people,” says Sally St. Clair, a psychologist and consultant to the internship program at Perkins School of Theology at SMU in Dallas. “Once that area is tapped, it’s very hard to break the addiction.”

For clergy, this addictive cycle is further fueled by the dynamics of shame and secrecy, says Mr.
Stephens of COSROW, because most clergy don’t have a way to address sexual struggles without jeopardizing their careers.

“Having someone to share with about their deepest issues promotes a healthy dynamic for dealing with them,” he said.

Mr. Richardson’s story is also worth considering, Mr. Stephens adds, as churches look for ways to extend mercy to sex offenders who want to worship there.

A recent *Christianity Today* article that questioned whether sex offenders have become “modern-day lepers” cited the case of James Nichols, an individual arrested for worshipping at a Baptist church in North Carolina. He violated a state law that bars sex offenders from coming within 300 feet of any place intended primarily for use, care or supervision of minors; the church has child-care facilities for families attending services.

Mr. Nichols is challenging the constitutionality of the law, claiming it violates his religious freedom.

As United Methodists wrestle with these issues, Mr. Stephens hopes the sexual ethics site can provide information and guidance—and spark needed dialogue.

“The issue is, how can a church be a place of hospitality as well as a place of sanctuary and protection for vulnerable people?”

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