

way of thinking about the problem. One of the ways to interpret abuse from a theological perspective is as failure to care and the shame that results. The human being is pictured as one who abuses or who may abuse what has been given into his or her care, hiding and denying what he or she has done. And it is this condition that the pastor must address in a situation of abuse either of self or of others. Psychologically, the abuse of self or others is most likely related to some significant failure in caring by the abuser's earliest caretakers. Abusers of self or others attempt to deal with the shame of having not received what they sought in their early relationships with those who cared for them by abusing other relationships or turning their shame inward in the form of rage toward themselves for their inadequacy and weakness. Abusers may try to hide their shame in substance abuse or deny it by violating the boundaries of others in a futile attempt to get something that will make them feel satisfied, or let others repeatedly violate their boundaries. An abused person also experiences shame, a misplaced shame that sometimes protects the abuser. Shame also proceeds from being too weak to prevent the abuse.

The value of this kind of psychological theory is that it is based in a relational understanding of human beings that resonates with a classical or biblical view. Moreover, it provides a way of thinking about how the refusal to care or the failure to care may develop. Although the pastor in a parish situation will not usually be involved in the treatment of an addicted or abused person, in his or her relationships with that person he or she should be aware of the fragility of the abused person's self-esteem. Though he or she is not treating the person's addiction or abuse, the pastor can offer an informal caring relationship in which the addicted or abused person can recover some of his or her self-esteem.

In recent years, health professionals have identified a pattern of behavior adopted by child victims of sexual abuse and called it "child abuse accommodation syndrome." The syndrome is composed of five elements: (1) secrecy, which defines the circumstance in which the sexual abuse occurs; (2) helplessness, which defines the condition in which children are often given permission to avoid the attention of strangers, but are required to be obedient and affectionate with adults entrusted with their care; (3) entrapment and accommodation, which defines the child's initial

response to sexual assault. Because the child cannot escape or disclose the assaults without destroying the family and his or her security, he or she learns to accept the situation in order to survive; (4) delayed, unconvincing disclosure will often be the child's response in a family when there is conflict between parental authorities; and (5) retraction of his or her disclosure is likely to follow if the assailant abandons the child, calls the child a liar, or if the child's mother becomes hysterical or does not believe him or her.<sup>2</sup>

The thing that has been most surprising to pastors and other counselors who have been told stories of sexual abuse is how the mother tolerated the abuse or could not believe that it was happening because of her conscious or unconscious awareness of her own or her family's vulnerability if she attempted to stop the abuse. She was aware that she and her children might be turned out without any means of financial support—that their overall life situation might be worse than if nothing was done.

Marie Fortune addresses pastors with practical guidelines for what to know, to be, and to do about abuse. First of all, she says, you, the pastor, need to be aware of your own comfort level with the issues of sexual assault, abuse, and sexuality. Everyone has biases and prejudices, and certain types of people with whom we do not work well; therefore do not hesitate to refer people with whom you can't work so that they may get help from a colleague.

Second, when you observe symptoms or suspect abuse, ask. Pastors are often reluctant to ask about things like abuse, suicidal feelings, or rape, apparently feeling that they should somehow know these things instinctively. It is important to deal with the shame, fear, and embarrassment that may prevent us asking directly for the information we need to help us help those within our pastoral care.

Third, make a habit of routinely including questions about possible experiences of sexual violence early in any pastoral counseling interviews. Again, it is easy to avoid such topics, but the fact that we have avoided them is part of the problem. Premarital counseling interviews may reveal some of the ways that a couple deals with conflict and the potential for abuse. Personal interviews with confirmands or other occasions of speaking with young people alone may provide opportunities to hear stories of abuse.

Should this happen, the pastor should ask if the young person has been to a rape crisis center or other source of aid. If he or she has not, find out if he or she wishes to contact someone who deals regularly with abuse or wishes to talk with you further about it. Respect his or her decision if he or she is not ready, but let him or her know that you, or other resources, are available.

Fourth, make every effort to ask your questions in a matter-of-fact, normal, respectful tone of voice. Your calmness and professional attitude can ease the feelings of shame and secrecy and may make disclosure possible at some future time. For example, "A lot of people have experienced a situation in which someone has abused or assaulted them. Has that ever happened to you?"

Fifth, the pastor needs to be aware of and to use community resources for dealing with sexual abuse. Knowing where and how to refer is important. The pastor may also consider taking some in-depth training in dealing with abuse or calling a crisis or counseling center for advice when he or she needs consultation and guidance.<sup>3</sup>

In working therapeutically with perpetrators of boundary violations, James N. Poling has noted that one of the most difficult issues for these persons is setting limits and appropriate boundaries. "It is obvious," he says, "that a man who molests a child does not know how to set limits on his own destructive behaviors, and does not respect the boundaries that other persons need in order to survive."<sup>4</sup> In their work with male adult sex offenders, family therapists Merle Fossum and Marilyn Mason found that many of these men had been deprived of nurturing touch in their childhood experiences. "What they had been denied, they had later taken; in the process they ended up violating others' boundaries. The denied or invaded touch resulted in that victim's 'taking' safe touch from some vulnerable young person."<sup>5</sup> Pastors need to understand the shame and how it contributes to abuse because that can allow them to act rather than just to react to what appears to be irrational and shameless behavior on the part of the abuser. Again, the legal requirement for reporting sexual abuse varies from state to state. The minister needs to know the law in his or her state and have that interpreted for him or her from a legal perspective. He or she also needs to sort out his or her own understanding of confidentiality and then gain some knowledge of how the law of that particular state has been recently interpreted.<sup>6</sup>

The recent literature on the pastoral care of women has been helpful in increasing awareness of the reality of male abuse of the less powerful. This kind of failure to care is not confined to individuals, but is expressed in societal structures as well. It is important for pastors to recognize that those in power tend to view their own behavior as the norm for everyone. A gender, race, or class that is in power tends to hold on to that power by not being able to see things any other way or by a failure to experience shame over the way things are. This is a reality, underscored by a theological view of sin, that may be seen in attitudes that encourage abuse of children, women, or other races and classes. Good pastoral care of victims requires that pastors examine their premises and prejudices about violence and about sexuality, their life experience and deepest feelings about women and men, and their beliefs about parents and children and family life.<sup>7</sup>

Pastors need to be aware of the kind of victim blaming that has gone on even in the church, particularly in its understanding of forgiveness. The church and its leaders have often been prone to encourage abused persons to forgive their abusers even in cases when forgiveness would involve denial of the anger necessary for healing. Marie Fortune and others have suggested that there are times when pastoral care clearly calls for anger rather than forgiveness. Pastors need to know that:

1. Forgiveness is not forgetting. We cannot forget, nor should we, because those experiences, even the pain they caused, have a great deal to teach us.
2. Forgiveness is not condoning. We are not saying that what was done to us was acceptable or "not so bad."
3. Forgiveness is not absolving those who have hurt us of all responsibility for their actions. They are still responsible for what they did and must deal with it themselves.
4. Forgiveness is not a form of self-sacrifice or swallowing our true feelings and playing the martyr.
5. Perhaps most important, forgiveness is not a clear-cut, one-time decision. We can't simply decide that today we are going to forgive. If it happens, it happens as a result of confronting painful past experiences and healing of old wounds.

What, then, is forgiveness?

1. It is a **discovery**, the by-product of an ongoing healing process. **Failure to forgive is not a failure of will but happens because wounds have not yet healed.**
2. Rather than being something we do, forgiveness is something that happens as a sign of positive self-esteem, when we are no longer building our identity around something that happened in the past. **Our injuries are just a part of who we are, not all of us.**
3. It is recognizing that **we no longer need our hatred and resentments and no longer need to punish the people who hurt us, wanting them to suffer as much as we did.**
4. Realizing that punishing them does not heal us, **forgiveness is putting to better use the energy once consumed by rage and resentment and moving on with life.**

Finally, because of the power differential between the participants and the resulting possibility of shame, there is the potential for abuse in the pastoral relationship itself. Anyone who has done a great deal of hospital visitation has probably experienced something like this. The pastor visits and the patient "opens up" to the pastor about some of his worries and concerns. Afterward, the pastor goes away feeling as if he or she has done well, established trust with the patient and is on the way to a significant pastoral relationship. On the next visit, however, the pastor is surprised to find that the patient acts as if he hardly knows the pastor. In contrast to the "open" way the patient related before, today he seems closed and distant.

The pastor leaves this second visit feeling confused. If he or she were more aware of the function of shame in relationships where people "open up," he or she would not be too surprised. Probably, without being aware of it, **the pastor encouraged the patient to share more of himself than he was ready to share.** On the next visit the pastor should be more aware of the patient's need to protect himself from the shame of too much openness. **Most important is the pastor's being aware that persons who acknowledge their need for help are more than likely experiencing some shame**

**because of needing that help.** One of the pastor's major responsibilities is seeing to it that he or she is not abusive in his or her pastoral relationships.<sup>8</sup>

## Summary and Reflection

The character of the care described in this chapter has been somewhat different. Hearing and remembering goes beyond the present to the pattern revealed by the past, and the care of the pastor is expressed by remembering and confronting the abuser or the abused person with the fact that this has happened before and that the abuse is not to be minimized and denied. It must be addressed and addressed now or even more serious consequences will result. The pastor needs to have knowledge about addiction and abuse, knowledge of addiction groups and other treatment options, knowledge of shelters for the abused, of state laws for reporting abuse, and of persons within and outside the church who can work with the pastor in addressing situations of abuse. There is a great deal that needs to be known and, often, to be done. Nevertheless, the pastor's presence continues to be an essential part of pastoral wisdom, even though in dealing with abuse of self and others, knowledge and guidance seem to be the important requirements. Although there is greater dependence on help from persons and agencies other than the pastor, the pastor's presence in the referral process helps maintain a significant connection between the abused and the abuser with a faith community. Often the shame involved in abuse prevents reconnection with the community that the pastor represents. Nevertheless, a pastor's caring presence makes reconnection with another faith community much more likely.