

## ESSAY

## The Urgent Need for Clergy Power Awareness: Impact from Individuals to Society

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### Introduction

Sociologists have long examined how power operates. Weber (1978) defines it as the ability to impose one's will despite resistance, and recognizes how charisma and tradition create influence in religious contexts. Berger (1967) builds on this, showing how religious institutions construct a "sacred canopy" that legitimates authority and shapes social order. Yet despite decades of sociological scholarship on power, my experience as a researcher and advocate for survivors of clergy sexual abuse suggests that many religious leaders lack a robust understanding of the multifaceted power they hold and its effects on others. The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements have further highlighted this deficit (Andrews 2018; Burke 2021).

This gap is compounded in some conservative Christian communities where critiques of power are dismissed as "Marxist" (Jones n.d.), and conformity, security, and tradition may reduce engagement with movements like #MeToo (Morris and LeCount 2022). Policy decisions, such as the Florida Board of Governors' removal of introductory sociology from the general education curriculum for promoting "woke ideology," may discourage some conservative Christians from using sociological perspectives to understand clergy power (Goñi-Lessan 2024).

When discussing issues rooted in power, such as domestic abuse and racism, many clergy members confine their analysis to theological frameworks. Furthermore, when power is addressed in seminaries, it is often confined to ethics courses or safeguarding training focused on sexual abuse (Dante, Levand, and Ross 2024; Meek et al. 2004; Stephens 2013a). Few programs offer an interdisciplinary approach that helps leaders understand the multifaceted nature of their power. A notable exception is *The Right Use of Power™*, though it extends beyond religious contexts (Right Use of Power Institute 2026).

When clergy power remains unexamined, the consequences are profound: all forms of abuse, whether spiritual, physical, or emotional, center on who holds power and how it is misused (Fordice 2025). Many clergy are unprepared to address power abuse due to insufficient ethical training, particularly regarding power dynamics, boundaries, and managing attraction to parishioners (Meek et al. 2004; Stephens 2013a). Developing power

literacy is essential for effective safeguarding initiatives (Dante et al. 2024), yet many have not engaged in such training. Furthermore, clergy power remains theoretical to those who do not fully grasp its impact, though clergy-congregant power imbalances can be viscerally experienced by those with less authority, as documented in clergy abuse studies (Kennedy 2009).

This essay argues that clergy and congregants should develop a robust, interdisciplinary understanding of clergy power, which I refer to as clergy power awareness (CPA). This understanding should not be merely memorized principles aimed at preventing misconduct, but rather dynamic knowledge that can serve as a lens to shape how we understand clergy power. Furthermore, integrating lived experience as a form of knowledge deepens understanding of clergy authority beyond abstraction.

### **Addressing Contra-power**

Common pushback I encounter when discussing clergy abuse involves the concept of contra-power. Though clergy may not always “feel” powerful (Stephens 2013b:44), they nevertheless hold spiritual and institutional power, as well as intersecting forms of power including gender, political influence, and financial status, which differ across individuals. Relatedly, Leimgruber (2022) uses the term “vulnerance” to describe the capacity to wound others inherent in the pastoral counseling role. However, contra-power harassment suggests that those with less formal authority may also be capable of inflicting harm.

Contra-power harassment occurs when individuals with less institutional power target those in formal leadership (Christensen et al. 2019). In academia, for example, fee-paying students may attempt to reverse power dynamics by undermining professors through disruptive or unacceptable conduct (Lee 2005). By contrast, contra-power is often less prevalent in religious contexts, as reliance on the charisma of clergy can render them less easily replaced and more likely to be protected, as observed in clergy abuse research (Woolston 2023).

Moreover, congregants with significant social capital may leverage their influence against clergy, such as when church elders consolidate their power to oppose or remove a targeted leader. However, religious institutions are frequently structured to elevate clergy as central figures of community identity, a dynamic reflected in church materials that prominently highlight clergy leadership. These patterns suggest that while contra-power exists, the structural elevation of clergy often shields them from meaningful challenges, reinforcing both their authority and the potential for unchecked influence. Research on clergy abuse indicates that institutional safeguarding of clergy substantially diminishes the likelihood of contra-power dynamics emerging in meaningful ways (Woolston 2023).

## Stakes and Stakeholders

Assessing clergy power carries high stakes. Elevated social power has been linked to diminished empathy (van Kleef et al. 2008), which I suggest partly explains why clergy often mishandle complex issues such as clergy sexual misconduct, child sexual abuse, and domestic violence (Byrnes 2020; Goertzen, Yancey, and Rogers 2024; Woolston 2023). Unchecked power in churches can attract individuals intending to exploit others (Manne 2024; Navarro 2014). One study found that roughly 70% of clergy reported knowing a colleague who engaged in sexual misconduct, and nearly a quarter had counseled affected individuals (Seat, Trent, and Kim 1993).

Nonetheless, theological disputes frequently take precedence over addressing these issues. For example, the largest U.S. Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), has extensively debated topics such as women's ministry roles, while abuse reform efforts have often stalled (Karthikeyan 2024).

Broader socio-political factors also shape the exercise of clergy power. Religious nationalism, which fuses religious beliefs with national identity, often marginalizes specific populations. In some countries, theocratic or culturally religious governments allow religion to shape politics and profoundly affect citizens. In democracies like the U.S., clergy may seek political influence, although this conflicts with the principle of separating church and state.

## Continuum of Clergy Power

When discussing power, my critique is frequently mistaken for negativity. Power operates on a continuum. It can be positive, characterized by nurturing care, shared authority, openness to dissent and dialogue, or it can be harmful, manifesting as abuse, clericalism, and rigid elitism that suppresses agency, silences dissent, and blocks critical inquiry.

Beyond its impact on individuals, clergy influence also extends to the broader community, shaping outcomes that can either promote societal flourishing or perpetuate oppression. A clergyperson who positively affects one individual may still fail to use their power to support the well-being of other community members. For example, many White clergy did not leverage their collective influence to support African Americans during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (Tisby 2019). Viewing clergy power as a continuum clarifies its complexity and situational nature, aiding analysis of both individual actions and broader social effects.

## Interdisciplinary Approaches

To foster CPA, clergy would benefit from moving beyond purely sociological or theological perspectives. A comprehensive approach would be interdisciplinary. For example, psychological and neurobiological research indicates that tonic immobility among sexual assault survivors is a reflexive physiological survival response (Barbano et al. 2025), often misread as “consent” in religious communities. Relevant academic disciplines are also intersectional; psychological harm may be reinforced by theological beliefs, and sociological structures often operate within political frameworks.

From a sociological perspective, clergy shape group dynamics, establishing behavioral norms, defining in-groups and out-groups, and/or contributing to moral panic (Vos 2022). They influence economic behavior and resource distribution through teachings on financial giving. Clergy shape family and gender roles in ways that may contribute to domestic violence (Boyer et al. 2022) and influence child discipline practices that can escalate into abuse (Nessan 2018). Clergy can also shape attitudes toward marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ individuals (Raynes 2024), minoritized racial and ethnic groups (Robinson 2012), people experiencing poverty (Corbett and Fikkert 2021), and those facing mental health challenges (Swinton 2024).

From a psychological perspective, clergy can promote psychological well-being through supportive communities, or inflict harm through toxic environments that can result in religious trauma (Oakley, Kinmond, and Humphreys 2018; Pawlikowski et al. 2019; Singh et al. 2024; Slade et al. 2023; Weber and Pargament 2014). Leaders in abuse-normalizing environments may unwittingly perpetuate spiritual abuse.

Clergy often fail to respond effectively to clergy sexual abuse, child maltreatment, and domestic violence, overlooking their traumatic impacts (Goertzen et al. 2024; Nessan 2018; Simpson 2025). Betrayal trauma can arise when trusted clergy harm followers, while institutional betrayal trauma occurs when religious bodies retraumatize survivors (Smith and Freyd 2017; Woolston 2023). Cultural betrayal trauma can happen when abuse within marginalized groups is silenced to protect collective identity under systemic oppression, such as racism (Gómez 2023).

Consequently, clergy must be trauma-informed, especially since one-quarter of individuals who seek mental health support in the U.S. turn to clergy (Wang, Berglund, and Kessler 2003). Yet, many clergy lack formal training in mental health counseling (Copello and Yancey 2025). Unlike licensed therapists, clergy are not typically required to pursue or continue education in counseling or trauma care. In underserved areas, clergy may be the only available support, heightening the risk of harm when they overestimate their ability to help (Blank et al. 2002; Jang et al. 2017; Klobucar 2022).

From a political perspective, clergy can shape political ideologies, voting behavior, and civic engagement, with the potential to empower or oppress. African American clergy, for example, were central to the Civil Rights Movement, confronting segregation and mobilizing communities for justice (Ghose 2017). In contrast, 18th-century evangelical preacher George Whitefield advocated for the legalization of slavery in Georgia, invoking theological justification to support systemic oppression (Tisby 2019).

In contexts where religion and government merge, clergy often wield political power that can silence dissenters, who may face severe consequences under religious law where it is strictly enforced. Similar dynamics can emerge in democratic societies. Christian nationalism highlights the need for ethical discernment in clergy political involvement. Whitehead and Perry (2022:118–119) describe Christian nationalism as idealizing “a mythic society in which real Americans—white, native-born, mostly Protestants—maintain control over access to society’s social, cultural, and political institutions, and ‘others’ remain in their proper place.” Proponents seek to preserve privilege for themselves “while equating racial and religious outsiders with criminality, violence, and inferiority” (Whitehead and Perry 2022:119).

When clergy align with political power, they widen the leader-follower gap, serving as spiritual and political guides. This role can shield misconduct, as political ties and clergy celebrity often help institutions conceal wrongdoing. For example, evangelical leaders Mike Bickle (founder of the International House of Prayer) and Robert Morris (founder of Gateway Church) maintained political connections and public prominence while years of alleged sexual abuse remained unaddressed (Johnson 2016; Post and Smietana 2025; Sainato 2025).

Clergy behavior can either uphold or undermine the moral and ethical teachings they represent. Two of the largest religious institutions, the global Catholic Church and the U.S.-based SBC, have faced scrutiny for systemic cover-ups of clergy abuse, even while promoting legislation in the name of moral values (Downen, Olsen, and Tedesco 2019; Rezendes 2002; Smietana 2022). Clergy sexual misconduct breaches their ethical duty to maintain professional boundaries with those holding less power (Stephens 2013a).

When such abuse is mishandled, it can lead survivors to lose religious faith (Woolston 2023). A study on clergy sexual abuse and its concealment in the Catholic Church found that it caused moral injury to survivors, diocesan and parish staff, as well as Jesuit university students, revealing the deep harm that results when trusted leaders betray their moral duty (Mescher et al. 2022). These findings highlight how unethical misuses of clergy power can profoundly negatively shape personal belief and community trust.

## CPA Education

A robust understanding of clergy power should be woven across seminary curricula. As Stephens (2013a) argues, ethics education is most effective when intentionally integrated throughout theological training, rather than confined to a single course. Such education should foster self-reflection, engage relevant research and lived experiences, and promote historical literacy to illuminate how clergy power has been used to both uplift and oppress communities. Future clergy must learn to ask self-reflective questions regarding their power, such as “How do people experience my presence? Am I maintaining professional boundaries? How do my teachings impact congregants and the wider community?” If allegations arise against a fellow clergyperson, they may then better discern whether their response reflects institutional betrayal or courage (Smidt, Adams-Clark, and Freyd 2023).

Lay leadership training and membership classes can also foster CPA. Empowered congregants may be equipped to ask questions such as “Is my leader using their influence responsibly? Is my safety being prioritized? Does this teaching nurture authentic growth and compassion, or does it reflect manipulation and control?”

Widespread CPA could support legislative advocacy by illuminating the unique influence of clergy compared to other professional positions of power. For example, *Texas Penal Code* § 22.011(b)(10) (n.d.) defines sexual assault as occurring when a clergyperson causes a 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.” While not perfect, this definition meaningfully acknowledges power imbalances that compromise consent.

## CPA in Practice

Integrating lived experiences can move understanding from abstraction toward a richer, more nuanced understanding. Black women scholars, such as bell hooks (1981), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), and Audre Lorde (1984), have been instrumental in emphasizing lived experience as crucial knowledge for understanding and challenging intersecting systems of oppression, including race, class, and gender. Beresford (2005) argues that knowledge derived from direct lived experience is less distorted and more accurate because it minimizes the interpretive distance often present in traditional research paradigms that prioritize objectivity and neutrality. Efforts are growing to incorporate trauma-informed approaches that center lived experience into pastoral care (Klaasen 2020; Singer 2024).

To illustrate these principles, the following fictional vignette draws on themes from research on adult clergy sexual abuse and is not based on any specific individual (de Weger 2022; Flynn 2008; Garland 2006; Kennedy 2009; Simpson 2025; Woolston 2023).

When Pastor Jordan asked Jennifer what had happened with his associate pastor, she explained that Pastor Riley had begun visiting her apartment late at night, claiming to offer guidance on navigating singleness. She felt uncomfortable but didn't speak up. "He's my elder, so I was used to deferring to him," she said. "I felt honored that he thought so highly of me and said I deserved a man worthy of me. He was like a father to me, so I felt safe. When he started asking about my views on certain sexual acts, I was confused, but I thought he would never hurt me, and I was overreacting. When he kissed me, I froze. Then I felt embarrassed for him, like I must have tempted him somehow. He preached so often about seductive women, and now I was one."

Pastor Jordan was conflicted. Riley had previously described Jennifer as "lustful" and untrustworthy, even though Jordan knew her to be highly faithful. Jordan had known of the late-night visits, but he had dismissed them. Riley was charismatic and well-connected, and Jordan valued his friendship and the visibility Riley brought to the church. Jordan hoped he was overreacting. Not fully understanding the situation, and not willing to, he issued a statement saying that Pastor Riley and Jennifer had an "inappropriate relationship." He proposed a restoration plan for Riley and asked Jennifer to forgive him so they could all "move on and focus on the church's mission."

When Jennifer refused to let the issue go after learning it was clergy sexual abuse, many congregants sided with the pastors, who labeled her resistance as bitterness, unrepentance, and a threat to the church's reputation. She soon left, marginalized and traumatized by the ordeal. "When he kissed me, I lost the pastor I thought I had—someone who truly wanted the best for me. Then, I lost my community and nearly my faith. Now, I'm losing my finances because trauma therapy is expensive. But what else can I do when I can't turn to my pastors for help?" Pastor Riley, gaining sympathy for the "attacks" on his character, was soon reinstated.

We can observe here how the lack of CPA contributed to an abusive situation. Pastor Riley exploited this lack of understanding by crossing boundaries with impunity, using his position to gain Jennifer's trust and deference while portraying her as "lustful" to another who could hold him accountable. His spiritual authority shielded him from scrutiny, even when his behavior warranted correction. His ability to use the pulpit to preach against "seductive women" created messaging from which he could benefit later. Institutional reputation was prioritized over Jennifer's well-being, as she held far less power within the church. She was treated as disposable by a congregation unequipped to recognize how Riley's misuse of power shaped both the abuse itself and the false narrative that followed.

If CPA education were more widely embedded across seminary education and church policies, it is plausible that Pastors Jordan and Riley might have engaged in conversations about ethical conduct and safeguarding expectations before employment. A

church educated about clergy power would likely emphasize the importance of leaders maintaining professional boundaries, reinforced through practices such as new member classes.

Within such a context, Jordan may have recognized warning signs and understood his responsibility to use his power to intervene on Jennifer's behalf, potentially ensuring that Riley faced serious consequences for clergy sexual abuse, including removal from his role. Jennifer might have had the language to identify Riley's professional boundary violations and recognize his sexualized behavior as abuse rather than personal failure.

The congregation might be better equipped to understand that Jennifer was not at fault, and collectively hold Riley accountable for his boundary violations and abuse. Perhaps members might have recognized how teachings on "seductive women" can reinforce harmful gender stereotypes and may deflect accountability from male perpetrators, a pattern documented in clergy abuse research (Kennedy 2009). This vignette represents one of many ways in which clergy misuse of power can unfold.

## Conclusion

Abuse takes many forms, all with misuse of power at its center. Clergy and laypeople must therefore develop an understanding of clergy power, which I term Clergy Power Awareness (CPA). Such awareness requires an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates lived experience as a source of knowledge. Power functions along a continuum, fostering care and justice or enabling harm and exploitation, shaping both individuals and society. As the vignette demonstrates, the absence of CPA can cause profound harm, while its presence can transform institutions and individual lives.

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