

Protestant denominations have faced their own sexual scandals

By RICHARD N. OSTLING
Associated Press

The flood of sex abuse allegations against priests this year has focused attention on the Roman Catholic Church, but Protestant denominations also have faced sex scandals involving clergy.

In fact, while data are sketchy, at least one expert believes the incidence of clergy molesting young children may be about the same in Protestantism as it is in Catholicism.

Others have found Protestant scandals have a tendency to surface in cases where male ministers are counseling women or teen-age girls, while the allegations against priests have frequently involved underage males.

Penn State historian Philip Jenkins argued in his 1996 book, "Pedophiles and Priests," that both secular and Catholic media exaggerate the extent of Catholic cases involving minors, while downplaying Protestant abuse.

For instance, the Rev. Robert Eckert of Grand Rapids, Mich., a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was sent to prison in 2000 for sexual involvement with a 15-year-old girl who worked as his baby sitter — but the case received relatively little

attention.

Jenkins, an Episcopalian, thinks a 1992 survey from the Chicago Archdiocese is more representative of the true picture in Catholicism.

Among 2,252 priests serving over four decades, 39 priests (1.7 percent) apparently abused minors. Only one abuser could be termed a pedophile under the strict clinical definition of the word — meaning the victim was prepubescent.

"I am prepared to be convinced the Catholics have a bigger problem" than Protestants, Jenkins said, but nobody has good data, partly because Protestant groups are too numerous. "I certainly haven't seen anything, and I'm looking hard."

Minneapolis psychologist Gary Schoener agreed.

"There are no real scientific data" on Protestants, he said. Since 1974, his Walk-In Counseling Center has been consulted on more than 2,000 cases of clergy sexual misconduct of all types, two-thirds of them with Protestants.

He finds that sex with adult women or teen-age girls is the most frequent Protestant problem.

In a typical Protestant case, a

PROTESTANT POLICIES ON CLERGY CONDUCT

What some major U.S. Protestant denominations say about the sexual conduct of clergy.

- **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:** Ministers must reject sexual promiscuity, manipulation and harassment. "Single ordained ministers are expected to live a chaste life. Married ordained ministers are expected to live in fidelity to their spouses" and homosexuals "are expected to abstain from homosexual sexual relationships."
- **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):** Biblical standards include "the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained."
- **United Methodist Church:** Clergy "are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living" and "agree to exercise responsible self-control," including "fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness." "Self-avowed practicing homosexuals" cannot be ordained or appointed.

jury awarded \$10 million in February to relatives of the late Deborah Yardley of Columbus, Ohio.

The suit charged that the Rev. Steven Colliflower, a United Methodist, had an affair with Yardley when she sought his help with alcohol and emotional problems. He left the ministry shortly after she made the allegation. She later died of liver disease.

World magazine, a weekly that covers events from a conservative religious perspective, says

Protestantism faces a "severe problem" of clergy involvement with people the ministers are counseling, calling this "an egregious abuse of power."

Schoener said that clergy having sex with prepubescent victims is "very rare" in all denominations.

A study of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), covering eight states over six years, found 17 cases filed against clergy with 31 victims, all female, with one case involving a minor.

There also are differences between Catholicism and the many Protestant faiths in the way sex-abuse allegations are investigated.

The U.S. Catholic bishops adopted a set of principles in 1992 calling for rapid response to allegations, openness with parishioners, care for victims and compliance with secular laws on reporting criminal conduct. But some Catholic bishops have admitted they didn't always follow those guidelines.

The Catholic principles also say a priest should be "promptly" suspended and referred for medical evaluation upon "sufficient evidence" of misconduct. The matter of reassignment is left open for a decision later.

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, at least, events occur more rapidly.

Bishop Donald McCoid of Pittsburgh, chairman of the Conference of Bishops for the 5.1 million-member denomination, said when colleagues receive allegations against clergy "anything else on our agenda is dropped."

If a pastor admits the charge, he said, the bishop defrocks him within a day and refers charges involving minors to civil authorities.

Another difference: Protestant lay officers — most of them mothers and fathers — exercise pivotal powers in supervising clergy. Catholic power is held almost completely by ordained bishops or religious superiors.

Lutheran, Methodist or Presbyterian clergy who claim innocence are put on leave but can defend themselves through church trials and appeals.

During debates over homosexual behavior, those three denominations have defined clergy

standards that limit sexual conduct to heterosexual marriage and require chastity for singles.

It's difficult to assess the response to abuse accusations in Baptist and other denominations, where each local congregation handles cases.

The most important example is the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant group in the United States with 101,000 clergy, double the total of U.S. Catholic priests and brothers. In the past decade, its press service reported two charges of molesting minors, against a youth worker and a martial arts teacher.

But Dee Ann Miller of Council Bluffs, Iowa, says misconduct is more widespread.

Since writing a 1993 book about her own abuse by a missionary in Africa, she has been told of allegations against 22 Southern Baptist clergy involved with minors, including six who molested prepubescent children.

Miller charges that the denomination has ignored the problem. She said abuse will "only stop when laity get upset enough to hold their leaders responsible for incompetency."