

Predators in the Sanctuary

Emotional and sexual entrapment can happen in the church. If we get honest, we can learn to overcome these problems—and help abusers and their victims.

Jane met Jim when they collaborated on a project at church. Jane found it a little unusual that Jim had grabbed her hands and stroked them as he prayed for her about a tough situation in her life. But she thought no more about Jim until he began calling her periodically, asking how things were going and wanting to pray with her.

She was touched that he seemed to care about her situation. When he suggested they go to a movie some time, she agreed, and two weeks later they had their first outing.

They continued to get together and seemed to have a lot in common as they grew to know each other. However, Jane started to wonder about Jim's motivation when he repeatedly refused to attend church with her.

She found it unusual that none of their friends witnessed any of their meetings, and Jim seemed to arrange it that way on purpose. Whenever Jane questioned him about it and expressed her concern, Jim would make excuses and tell her she was imagining things.

Jim's comments became increasingly sexual. He even asked Jane whether she'd had any sexual activities in her previous relationships, despite an agreement between them that their own relationship was platonic.

When Jim was at Jane's house one Sunday afternoon for lunch,

he asked to slow-dance with her and invited her to sit on his knee. Although she participated, she was very uncomfortable. After Jim had playfully slapped and grabbed her backside several times and massaged her shoulders, she decided she'd had enough.

Jane told Jim she didn't like his actions or his questions about her sexual past. He tried to slough off her comments, but Jane persisted until he got the point.

Chatting with Jim one night on the phone, Jane discovered he would be at a conference she was attending the next day. In fact, they had discussed going together but Jim initially had said he wasn't interested.

He told her a pastor friend had asked him to the conference and that he felt obliged to go and to sit with the pastor in his section. When Jane said they should meet up and sit together, Jim declined.

For Jane, that was the beginning of the end of their almost yearlong relationship. When she discovered Jim would be hosting a conference at their church and had never told her he'd been working on the event, Jane ended the relationship, realizing their "friendship" was simply a selfish manipulation of her on Jim's part.

She confided in her senior pastor about Jim's behavior. The pastor prayed for her and admonished Jim. After that, Jim dropped out of sight.

Marian enjoyed going to coffee hour after church and thought nothing of it when she gave her business card to Alan. But

when he began sending frequent e-mails and leaving dozens of phone messages for her, Marian became scared and angry. She told him to stop pursuing her, but he didn't listen.

Coffee hour didn't hold the same appeal it once did because every time Marian turned around Alan was standing close by, staring at her. He told her he was just trying to show her how highly he thought of her.

After three months of this harassment, she confided in her senior pastor, who had a meeting with Alan and asked him to stop contacting Marian. Alan complied but left the church shortly afterward.

How It Works

Situations such as Jane's and Marian's are not uncommon in churches, says Stephen Arterburn, co-founder of New Life Clinics, a group of Christian professional counseling and treatment centers scattered across the United States.

"This happens a lot because we put people together in churches—whether its in small groups, cell groups or work teams," says Arterburn, co-author of *Every Man's Battle* (Waterbrook Press), a study guide for men battling sexual addictions. "One of the downfalls is when we accept someone's wrong behavior simply because they're Christian."

In Jane's and Marian's cases, the men weren't seeking to establish sincere relationships but were preying upon the women emotionally and physically.

“We should never cloud the fact that many, many Christian men are living with sex addictions and romance addictions,” states Arterburn, who frequently tells his own story of how he got a Christian girl pregnant while attending college and then persuaded her to have an abortion.

Mark Laaser, founder of Minneapolis-based Faithful and True Ministries, an organization established to offer accountability and healing to sex addicts, says many so-called predatory relationships begin as Jane and Jim’s did—when one person disguises himself or herself as a “helper.”

“They lend an ear to the victim and can appear superspiritual, even quoting Bible verses, while they’re really secretly feeding their own desire for control and adoration,” he says.

Laaser is himself a former pornography and sex addict. He believes spiritual intimacy can easily lead to sexual intimacy—followed by a further entanglement: “The next step is to tell the victim he or she is the predator’s soulmate.”

Arterburn says a woman shouldn’t let a man off the hook just because she believes his being a Christian is the most important prerequisite for dating.

“Women need to start listening to their inner voice, their gut instinct about a guy. If something feels wrong, it usually is. The most important thing is not to be desperate for a relationship,” he says. “The next most important thing is to look at the way the man treats others, study the kind of friends he has and observe the relationship he has with his mother.”

Men who recognize the aberrant behavior in themselves and want to do something about it can start getting help by joining a men's group, Arterburn says. "Men get healthy by being with other men, not by trying repeatedly to have romantic relationships with women."

Chris Burge, who leads a 600-strong singles ministry in Manhattan, New York, believes it's crucial for pastors to preach the empowerment of women. The message is vital, he says, for enabling a woman to treasure herself and to distinguish between a healthy man and a predatory one.

"We need to be raising up spiritual divas like Abigail in the body of Christ, women who have faith and integrity but aren't doormats. We don't need to keep giving sermons on the victimized woman," says Burge, who is 38 and single.

The modern church lacks accountability, he points out, and large churches with "buffet-style" Christianity enable men to prey with more ease on unsuspecting women.

"Men can ... easily enter a big church and then leave again. The itinerant parishioner needs to be pinned down. Simply the presence of more male ushers can deter a sick guy from lingering," Burge observes.

At the church he attends—charismatic Christian Cultural Center in Brooklyn, New York—50 percent of the 21,000 members are men. Accountability is a big factor among the many small groups.

"Charismatic churches, at times, are notorious for preaching on limited subjects that revolve around faith, healing and

prosperity, while it's increasingly important to preach on life issues like this," says Burge, who is also co-author of *His Rules: God's Practical Road Map for Becoming and Attracting Mr. or Mrs. Right* (Waterbrook Press).

"Men must renew their minds when it comes to sexual stuff, while women must renew their minds romantically," he points out. "Both sexes must do their due diligence in checking out the history of a person they're interested in and should know them for a while before dating them."

Further, he exhorts men and women who are seeking a relationship with the opposite sex to first take an honest look at themselves to determine if they are the same kind of person they hope to attract.

In the United States, 47 percent of the adult population are single, divorced or widowed, according to statistical evidence from 1999-2000. The percentage is similar in Canada and Europe. In contrast, a disparate 94 percent of pastors are married, a recent study commissioned by researcher George Barna determined.

"It's astounding that people in church leadership are not aware of the statistics on singles. They're so bent on the family unit that we now have an unfortunate social gap between singles and married people," says Virginia McInerney, a single, 47-year-old legislative writer and researcher for the Ohio General Assembly and author of *Single But Not Separate* (Charisma House).

She notes that although most pastors are married, "They don't have the personal experience of being a single adult, nor do

they have many friends who are single.”

“Singles are given a contradictory message from the pulpit,” she adds. “While we’re all told how wonderful marriage is, when singles approach the pastor about their desire for marriage, they’re frequently told to just focus on the Lord.

“We’re often quoted Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 where he says it’s better to be single than married. This leaves singles confused. Many churches have a large number of singles who are vibrant and confident in their 20s, but as they age and remain unmarried, they’re pushed off to the sidelines. They feel wounded and stuck in a rut.”

She says the church ought to be inclusive of the entire body of Christ to enable singles to feel worthwhile and valuable, and to help prevent the destructive, secretive behaviors that predators engage in.

Having led a monthly series about singleness for several years at the Columbus Vineyard Church, where she is one of 7,000 members, and spoken at conferences in the U.S. on Christian singleness, McInerney is not a proponent of singles gatherings. She believes they foster a separation mentality and hold the potential for abuse. She prefers to see families and couples drawing singles into their lives.

Henry Cloud, a clinical psychologist and co-author of *Boundaries in Dating* (Zondervan) and the recently released *How to Get a Date Worth Keeping* (Zondervan), agrees that Christian groups can be fertile territory for emotional or sexual predators. He notes that those who want to pick up others commonly do so by frequenting church singles groups.

“I’ve seen situations where men are asked to leave the church after it becomes known that several women experienced a common pick-up scenario,” he says. “A guy I know who was warned by church leadership had an established pattern—he would zero in on someone, lurk in the background and then begin to follow them around. He was well-dressed, successful and charming, and fooled people for a while.”

Why Dating Matters

Cloud proposes that one reason this behavior is more possible with Christian singles than with non-Christian singles is because the church has effectively outlawed dating.

“Singles are only supposed to have spiritual friendships, so people are becoming distorted in their behavior,” he observes. “It seems taboo for a man who’s interested in a woman to ask her out directly, so you’ll often find men just hanging out with women as friends, while they really want something more but don’t know how to pursue it.”

He advises women, as Arterburn does, to learn how to trust their feelings and avoid relationships with male friends who make them feel off-balance or unsafe. If the friend is a good man, Cloud says, he will become clear about his intentions for either friendship or dating.

Cloud also argues that dating is an important way to learn about relationships—it helps a person gauge what he or she likes or doesn’t like in another person.

“In the Christian culture, dating needs to be demystified,” Cloud states. “Jack asked Jill for dinner and a movie, but it

doesn't mean they're looking at bridal magazines the next day. It's important to have periods of time when you're dating just to have fun and not to be serious."

Josie Newman is a veteran freelance reporter based near Toronto whose work frequently appears in Charisma, The Globe and Mail, The National Post and other publications. She is a single Christian who has personally experienced some of the hazards described in this story.