

ARTICLES

The Scars Are Written on My Soul: The Impacts of Adult Clergy Sexual Exploitation

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Keywords: institutional betrayal, adult clergy sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, abuse-informed counselling, compliance and entrapment, betrayal trauma, spiritual injury, clergy sexual misconduct, #ChurchToo

<https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.143858>

Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia

Vol. 13, Issue 2, 2025

This article examines the multifaceted impacts of sexual exploitation perpetrated by clergy on adult congregation members within evangelical and Pentecostal Christian faith communities in Australia. Drawing on responses from 33 participants, the findings illustrate extensive spiritual, psychological, emotional, relational, physical, and financial injuries. A central theme to emerge was compliance and entrapment, reflecting the cumulative effects of systemic grooming, institutional complicity, and post-abuse control tactics. Several participants identified counselling as a critical factor in their healing journey, thereby reinforcing the need for practitioners to understand the unique dynamics of clergy-perpetrated sexual exploitation and its complex trauma impacts. The findings emphasise the necessity to reconceptualise clergy sexual misconduct not as consensual relationships but rather as sexual exploitation, which is a form of gender-based violence with impacts that parallel those experienced by victim-survivors of domestic violence.

Clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse of adults remains a largely unacknowledged form of sexual exploitation. While there is ample awareness of child sexual abuse and its impacts within religious institutions, the exploitation of adults, particularly women, by pastors and spiritual leaders is often reframed as a consensual moral failing or a mutual affair. These narratives obscure the underlying dynamics of grooming, coercion, and institutional complicity that characterise adult clergy sexual abuse (Kennedy, 2009; Pooler & Frey, 2017). The terms *clergy* and *pastor* are used interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to individuals in positions of spiritual authority. When a pastor uses spiritual authority and relational trust to initiate and maintain sexual contact with an adult congregant, consent is compromised (Fortune, 1999; Moncrief-Stuart & Pooler, 2025). The grooming process may elicit compliance from the survivor, but owing to the significant power imbalance and the pastor's undue influence, compliance cannot be equated with meaningful consent.

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The impacts of sexual violence on adult survivors are well documented in the secular literature. Research highlights significant psychological, emotional, physical, sexual, and financial consequences, including diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, suicidality, substance use, and relational breakdown (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2015; Townsend et al., 2022; Vitek & Yeater, 2021). In faith-based contexts, these impacts are compounded by additional challenges: spiritual crises, loss of faith, shame, institutional betrayal, and community ostracism (Blakemore et al., 2017; Kennedy, 2009; Moncrief-Stuart & Pooler, 2025; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022; Pooler & Droesch, 2025; Smith & Freyd, 2014). Institutional power, theological messaging, the pastoral care relationship, and the moral authority of the perpetrator create conditions for ongoing coercion and silence (Garland, 2006; Leimgruber, 2022).

Literature Review

Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse

This research situates adult clergy sexual abuse as sexual exploitation since it sits under the umbrella of sexual violence. Sexual exploitation within faith communities does not happen in isolation, nor does it occur in a vacuum (Campbell et al., 2009). It must be understood within the broader context of sexual violence in both religious institutions and Australian society. As a form of deeply embedded gender-based violence, sexual violence affects individuals across all demographics; moreover, women and children are disproportionately affected (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2024). It encompasses a range of behaviours including sexual harassment, grooming, assault, and coerced or forced sexual acts (AIHW, 2020). Within religious institutions, adult clergy sexual misconduct has often been framed as moral failure, adultery, or a consensual affair. However, researchers, international Christian media, and advocacy groups have increasingly begun naming this dynamic *adult clergy sexual abuse* (de Weger, 2016; Hopkins, 2024; Kennedy, 2009; Lee, 2025; Moncrief-Stuart & Pooler, 2025; Roys, 2023; Shepherd, 2024). Still, a tendency remains to view such abuse as the result of individual deviance—“one bad apple” or “one bad pastor” (Death, 2015). This article challenges that framing, demonstrating that church culture itself can facilitate sexual violence through embedded theological beliefs and institutional practices. These cultural conditions normalise male dominance, enforce rigid gender roles, and uphold expectations of unquestioning submission to authority, all of which create environments ripe for abuse.

Professional Sexual Misconduct and Clergy Abuse

Sexual contact within relationships of professional trust, between therapist and client, doctor and patient, or pastor and congregant, is widely recognised as an abuse of power. Psychiatrist Peter Rutter (1989) described this dynamic in his book titled *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*, noting that while rarely

acknowledged in formal literature at the time, it was disturbingly common in women's lived experiences. His interviews revealed consistent patterns in how men across professional roles—doctor, therapist, professor, or pastor—exploited women's trust through similar tactics of manipulation and coercion, often under the cover of spiritual or therapeutic authority. Rutter argued that in these relationships, the capacity to decline sexual advances is significantly undermined by the power imbalance and enforced silence in professional settings. Researchers and professional bodies across various disciplines have supported this view. Tschan (2014) described professional sexual misconduct as a range of exploitative behaviours including sexualised comments, grooming, non-consensual touch, and coercive intimacy, made possible by the inherent inequality within professional roles. McMahon (1997) and Buchhandler-Raphael (2010) have long advocated for the criminalisation of such misconduct, particularly when professionals exploit their authority, trust, and spiritual significance to override informed consent.

Counsellors and psychotherapists in Australia are bound by professional ethical codes that explicitly prohibit sexual relationships with clients. For example, Standard 6D of the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia's (PACFA, 2017) *Code of Ethics* states that practitioners must not engage in romantic or sexual relationships with clients or their close family members during practice and for at least five years following the conclusion of therapy. Similarly, Section C.4.3 of the Australian Psychological Society's (APS, 2007) *Code of Ethics* prohibits sexual relationships with clients for a minimum of two years after therapy. Further, the psychologist must first consult with a senior psychologist and encourage the former client to seek independent counselling, given the potential for vulnerability and exploitation. For psychologists, these codes are enforced within national regulatory frameworks, overseen by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, making breaches subject to external investigation and sanction.

By contrast, clergy who have significant power and influence over their congregation members have less external oversight. Evangelical and Pentecostal organisations often rely on internal grievance procedures, such as those by the Australian Christian Churches (ACC), which at times framed pastoral sexual exploitation as “improper conduct” (ACC, 2023, p. 5). This disparity in regulatory frameworks leaves adult congregation members vulnerable and unsupported. When pastors exploit their spiritual role to initiate sexual contact, consent is fundamentally compromised. Such actions are not private indiscretions but forms of professional sexual exploitation, violating trust and ethical conduct in ways consistent with abuses recognised in other professional settings.

Adult Clergy Abuse and Trauma

Traumatic sexual experiences have the potential to alter and shape an individual's worldview. As Kim and Shaw (2024) observed,

Where once we were trusting, sure of our ability to navigate the world, confident in who we were, sexual violence disrupts our sense of self, our confidence in ourselves and our ability to gauge situations, and our sense that the world is a safe, good place for us. (p. 93)

When pastoral authority overrides agency, the result is significant trauma (Flynn, 2003). Research consistently demonstrates that adult survivors of clergy abuse experience complex and enduring harms, including spiritual devastation, psychological trauma, sexual dysfunction, relational breakdowns, and socio-economic impacts, which mirror those observed in survivors of incest and intimate partner violence (Flynn, 2003; Garland, 2006; Kennedy, 2009; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022). Common symptoms include shame, isolation, self-blame, denial, poor self-esteem, suicidal ideation, and disconnection from self and others (Flynn, 2003; Kennedy, 2009; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022).

Flynn's (2003) qualitative study of 25 adult women sexually abused by clergy identified trauma symptoms consistent with both acute and complex PTSD. These include hyperarousal, dissociation, emotional dysregulation, intrusive thoughts, somatic symptoms, sleep disturbances, and relational distrust. Garland (2006) similarly observed that PTSD symptoms intensified when survivors disclosed the abuse, suggesting that public disclosure compounds psychosocial distress, particularly when met with institutional denial or hostility. This sense of prolonged psychological harm is often accompanied by feelings of entrapment. Stark (2007) described entrapment as the cumulative effect of coercive control, which undermines autonomy and obstructs a victim's ability to leave or seek help. In religious settings, this dynamic is intensified by spiritual manipulation. Kennedy's (2009) research found that most adult survivors felt "trapped" (p. 94) in a complex web of pastoral control, institutional silence, and theological coercion. The *God factor*, a term used to describe the unique spiritual authority leveraged by clergy, distorted victims' sense of agency, rendering the abuse particularly difficult to name or resist (Flynn, 2003). As one survivor reflected, "no one would understand the web in which he entrapped me" (Poling, 1999, p. 67).

This entrapment is not merely psychological but deeply spiritual. Among the most devastating and under-acknowledged impacts of clergy sexual abuse is the injury to a victim's faith and spiritual identity. Langberg (2020) described spiritual abuse as "using the sacred to harm or deceive the soul of another" (p. 127), while Pargament et al. (2008) argued that its effects may be even more traumatic than physical violence. Pooler and Barros-Lane (2022) found that more than half of adult survivors reported negative impacts on their relationship with God, including spiritual shame, fear of divine punishment, and loss of faith. These injuries are often compounded by purity culture teachings that frame sexual contact, regardless of coercion, as a moral failure on the part of the victim. Survivors have internalised blame, experienced community ostracism, and withdrawn from religious practice

altogether (Garland, 2006; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022). As one survivor described it, the experience felt like “soul rape” (Garland, 2006, p. 13), capturing the significant sense of spiritual violation that accompanies such betrayal.

Institutional Betrayal

The response of religious institutions to allegations of clergy sexual abuse has been widely criticised. Pooler and Barros-Lane (2022) found that nearly half of the victims reported being treated worse by the church after the abuse had been disclosed. Institutional betrayal, defined as the failure of an institution to prevent or respond appropriately to harm committed within its ranks, has been shown to exacerbate trauma, often causing as much harm as the abuse itself (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Victims frequently report being silenced, blamed, and shunned, while the abusive pastor remains in leadership or is quietly relocated (Garland, 2006; Kennedy, 2009). Theological narratives are often manipulated to inflict further harm, and victims are told to forgive their abuser, confess their part in the abuse, or remain silent “for the sake of the church” (Flynn, 2008; Garland, 2006). Institutional responses often mirror dynamics observed in intimate partner violence, since questions like “What did she do to tempt him?” or “Why didn’t she stop it?” displace responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim.

Research has highlighted the crucial role of naming in shaping public perception, self-understanding among victims, and institutional accountability. Victims are often gaslit by institutional narratives that frame the abuse as consensual or romantic. Gaslighting involves the systematic denial or distortion of reality, leaving survivors doubting their own perceptions and memories (Sweet, 2019). Terms like “affair” or “moral failing” obscure the reality of power, manipulation, and coercion (Kennedy, 2009). Garland (2006) stressed that naming the behaviour “abuse” rather than referring to it as an affair is critical to recovery. Survivors may also be stigmatised as biblical archetypes such as the “Jezebel spirit”, a misogynistic trope used to shame and silence women who challenge male authority (Collins, 2000; Quick, 1993). Such narratives uphold patriarchal theological frameworks that displace responsibility, shifting it from clergy onto survivors, thereby reinforcing structures that enable further abuse and compounding the psychological and spiritual trauma already endured.

Method

This exploratory research forms part of a larger project. The data presented here is drawn from the author’s Master of Philosophy thesis (Simpson, 2024). Thirty-three respondents participated in an online survey, recruited through purposive sampling. The survey was promoted through targeted social media and outreach to professional and survivor networks. Eligible participants were adults (18+) who, as an adult, had experienced sexual coercion, sexual

abuse, sexual harassment, or an “inappropriate intimate relationship” with a pastor or leader in an Australian evangelical or Pentecostal Christian faith community.

Materials

This study used an anonymous online survey (Qualtrics), which incorporated both closed- and open-ended questions—a method well-suited to sensitive topics (Braun et al., 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006) and previously applied in clergy abuse research (de Weger, 2016). The survey addressed six areas: grooming tactics, perpetrator behaviour and coercion, sexual harassment, boundary violations, impacts on wellbeing, and institutional responses. Following trauma-informed principles (Campbell et al., 2019; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014), the design emphasised participant safety, choice, trust, empowerment, and cultural/gender sensitivity.

Question development drew on established frameworks. Grooming items were informed by Sinnamon’s Seven Stage Model (Sinnamon, 2017), Biderman’s Chart of Coercion (Biderman, 1957), the Power and Control Wheel (Domestic Violence and Prevention Centre, 2017), and Kennedy’s Clergy Sexual Exploitation Wheel (Kennedy, 2009). Sexual harassment questions were adapted from the Australian Human Rights Commission’s (2022) national survey and the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss et al., 2007). Questions regarding the impact on survivors were inspired by previous research on clergy abuse and sexual trauma (Chaves & Garland, 2009; de Weger, 2016; Flynn, 2003; Kennedy, 2009; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019). Institutional response questions incorporated betrayal trauma theory (Freyd, 1996, 1997) and information gleaned from previous survivor-based studies (de Weger, 2016; Flynn, 2003; Kennedy, 2009).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016), targeting communities in which participants who may have experienced pastor sexual misconduct may be located, available, and willing to participate. Potential participants were informed about the study’s aims, eligibility criteria, and ethical considerations before providing informed consent electronically via the participant information form. Support services were provided throughout the survey. Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was collected. Hosting the survey online not only ensured accessibility but also supported anonymity, which was crucial given the close-knit nature of evangelical and Pentecostal Christian faith communities. Ethical approval was obtained from the Queensland University of Technology’s Human Research Ethics Committee.

Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Survey responses were read repeatedly to identify patterns of meaning; coded inductively and informed by trauma, coercion, sexual violence, and clergy sexual exploitation literature; then grouped into potential themes and subthemes. These were refined, defined, and related back to the research questions within a trauma-informed feminist paradigm. Because evangelical and Pentecostal communities are often close-knit, particular care was taken to protect participants' anonymity. Standard pseudonyms are not used in this article because linking quotations could risk identification; instead, quotations are presented without identifiers to preserve confidentiality while still representing the voices of survivors.

Epistemology

This study was grounded in a trauma-informed feminist paradigm, recognising clergy-perpetrated sexual exploitation as both personal trauma and a manifestation of gendered power, patriarchal theology, and institutional betrayal. A trauma-informed approach prioritised safety and participant voice, while a feminist lens highlighted structural power imbalances (Collins, 2000; SAMHSA, 2014). By centring survivors, this approach affirms trauma as both an individual and collective experience and recognises survivors' narratives as legitimate sources of knowledge (Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008; Harris & Fallot, 2001; J. Herman, 1992; J. L. Herman, 2023). It also highlights the intersection of foundational religious messages with experiences of sexual violence, exposing the resulting crises of faith (Kim & Shaw, 2024).

Researcher Reflexivity

As a counsellor and survivor researcher with lived experience in religious contexts, the researcher approached this study with a commitment to trauma-informed, survivor-centred principles. A reflexive stance was maintained throughout the research process, including journaling, supervision, and critical engagement with participant narratives, to ensure that personal assumptions and experiences did not overshadow the voices of participants.

Results

Thirty-three individuals participated in the survey: 32 identified as women and one as gender fluid. At the time of victimisation, the participants were aged between 18 and 45 years and had an average age of 24; the pastors ranged from 21 to over 61 years and had an average age of 39. This 15-year average age gap illustrates both generational and positional power differentials, underscoring the authority pastors held over younger congregants. Two-thirds of participants (67%) were engaged in volunteer or paid roles within

their churches when the abuse occurred, and 65% were single. A majority (69%) also reported growing up in religious households in which messages of submission and respect for authority were emphasised.

Analysis of the impacts and wellbeing survey revealed three overarching themes: (1) Compliance and entrapment, (2) Injuries and harm, with subthemes of spiritual, psychological, emotional, relational, physical, and financial injuries, and (3) Therapeutic help-seeking, with subthemes of helped and harmed. Each of these themes is outlined below.

Theme 1: Compliance and Entrapment

Across accounts, participants described grooming practices that gradually eroded personal boundaries and produced compliance. Pastors were reported to use a combination of spiritual authority, emotional closeness, psychological manipulation, and institutional positioning to cultivate dependency and silence. These practices created an environment in which sexual contact could occur under conditions of influence and coercion rather than genuine choice. Survivors emphasised that the tactics were highly personalised, that is, tailored to their vulnerabilities or needs, which intensified the sense of entrapment. A defining feature across participants' narratives was a sense of being trapped in exploitative relationships with pastors. Survivors described feeling emotionally tethered to the pastor even long after the abuse had ceased. Language such as "trapped", "bonded", and "groomed to be compliant" highlights the presence of traumatic bonding (Carnes, 1997) and the effects of coercive control (Stark, 2007). As one survivor reflected,

18 years later, I am still dealing with the ramifications of his decisions. It has taken years to recognise it as abuse and more years to get the courage to report him, as I felt so bonded [that] I wanted to protect him at my own detriment.¹

Alongside compliance, some survivors described the deep confusion of processing their attachment to their pastor. As one noted,

I don't feel bonded to the pastor, but I don't feel free either. I have not seen him in a long time, and if I saw him, I don't know how I would feel.

Quantitative responses reinforced these patterns: 79% of participants reported second-guessing themselves, 77% felt compelled to demonstrate unwavering loyalty and described feeling like they were "walking on eggshells" around the pastor, and 65% reported losing their sense of identity in the process. A further 65% said they neglected their own needs to prioritise those of the pastor, while half believed it was "too late" to break away. Some

¹ This paper brings to the foreground the experiences of victim-survivors. To do this, quotations are presented in block quotation format for emphasis.

participants (26%) had never disclosed their experience to anyone, and others remained emotionally bonded to their abuser years later. These dynamics are not indicative of mutual or consensual relationships; rather, they represent prolonged psychological and spiritual coercion. Pastors employed non-physical tactics to enforce compliance and ensure dependency, including threats of spiritual harm, ostracism, suicide, secrecy, guilt, and misplaced blame. Such strategies sustain the traumatic attachment without overt violence, thereby reinforcing the survivor's entrapment (Stark, 2007).

Entrapment was also evident in how difficult participants found it to disclose, often silencing themselves out of concern for others. One participant explained,

The pastor was married, and I knew his children well—I was acutely aware of the potential impact on them.

Another explained,

I wanted to tell someone but was too afraid, I had no one to confide in, [and] I didn't know how to express what happened.

Years of silence often led to overwhelming regret and shame. Several participants reflected on the heavy burden of not speaking out, knowing that others might also have been harmed.

Theme 2: Injuries and Harm

The term *injuries* is used in this article to reflect the significant harms faced by the survivors, highlighting that the abuse caused damage across all areas of wellbeing.

Spiritual Injuries

Spiritual harm was among the most significant and enduring injuries reported. Survivors described a loss of connection to faith, God, church, and their own sense of spiritual identity. Many no longer attended church, or they avoided spiritual practices altogether. The torment experienced by the survivors is evident in their descriptions of struggling to reconcile their faith with their traumatic experiences. One respondent described this struggle as feeling,

broken, shattered, and battered.

Others described experiencing a crisis of faith, fears of hell, feelings of abandonment by God, and a breakdown in spiritual practices. This was evidenced by comments such as,

My faith was shattered. It is hard to articulate how I feel about faith now. My trust in pastors and churches has been shattered.

I can't listen to [name of church] worship music, it's too triggering. For a few years, I found it hard to pray.

| My spirit feels disconnected from my body.

| [The pastor] commented that he was going straight to hell which made me feel condemned also.

The intersection of faith and abuse by a pastor intensifies the inner turmoil. For many, the betrayal by someone viewed as God's representative crushed not only their belief system but their very sense of self. While some survivors retained elements of faith, it was often accompanied by deep confusion, vigilance, and grief. As one survivor reflected,

| My faith has been the source of immense pain, but also the foundation of my emotional, physical, and spiritual recovery.

Another stated,

| [I] distrust churches, and pastors, and am confused with my own calling to ministry. Still have shame and blame myself. Hope to be in ministry again, but very lost, feel displaced, alone, and useless.

Psychological Injuries

The psychological injuries suffered by survivors included anxiety (72%), PTSD (52%), depression (48%), dissociation, and maladaptive coping strategies. Almost half of the participants reported suicidal ideation, of whom some had attempted to self-regulate through self-harm, medication misuse, or substance use. These findings are consistent with the literature on trauma and clergy sexual abuse of children (Blakemore et al., 2017; McPhillips et al., 2020) and underscore the long-term psychological toll of clergy sexual exploitation. Some participants noted,

| I desperately wanted to end my life, but I was too scared.

| I had panic attacks and nightmares after the abuse.

| During that time, I started using sleeping pills during the day to get me through work.

| [I feel] depressed, hopeless, self-loathing [and] confused in my sexuality.

These psychological impacts of clergy sexual abuse emphasise the importance of targeted mental health interventions to support survivors.

Emotional Injuries

Survivors described a range of intense emotional responses, including shame, grief, guilt, anger, and betrayal. One respondent noted,

[I feel] shame about not speaking up. Guilt that abuse may have occurred with others. Foolish that I stayed silent and compliant. Developed distrust of self and other authorities.

Many noted the difficulty of trusting their own feelings after realising they had been deceived. Some took decades to process what had occurred. One participant reflected,

I first thought he loved me, and [later] I realise[d] he didn't. All the shame and fear came. I was so innocent and then so broken.

Others emphasised the burden of guilt, often connected to the expectation within faith communities that they should forgive their perpetrators. As one respondent explained,

I have feelings of hatred still towards the pastor and his family. I feel guilty for this. I should be able to forgive.

These accounts highlight how shame and guilt were compounded by religious and cultural narratives that prioritised silence, forgiveness, and deference. Such emotional injuries are consistent with prior sexual violence research, which shows survivors often internalise stigma and victim-blaming attitudes (Feiring et al., 2002), feel misplaced guilt for perceived complicity despite power imbalances (Kennedy, 2009), and grieve overwhelming losses of faith, trust, and community (Garland & Argueta, 2010).

Relational Injuries

The abuse disrupted survivors' relationships with friends, family, faith communities, and intimate partners. Over half reported feeling isolated and disconnected from themselves or others. Fifty-nine per cent grieved the loss of the pastoral relationship, despite its exploitative nature. Several individuals noted feeling abandoned and shunned by their faith community. Survivors noted,

Church leaders blamed and shamed me and gave me minimal support.

I was fired, told I could not return to the church. The senior pastors, who were his parents, blamed me and wanted me to go away.

I have trust issues and have limited strength or emotional resilience for interactions with people. I also suffer from dissociative moments, which affected my work.

The pastors told me I had had an affair at first and told the board I was involved in an affair, the pastor was then let go, later two other women stepped forward ... but the damage was already done to my reputation as then 800 people in the church thought I was an adulterous woman.

For some, the consequences were lifelong and included moving interstate, estrangement, or avoidance of any context that reminded them of the church. The relational fallout mirrored the pattern of social collapse commonly seen in domestic and spiritual abuse contexts. One respondent reflected on the enduring nature of this harm, stating,

[I] avoid normal social events like weddings [and] funerals held at churches. Just last week, I went to a conference, and someone from the church was there, and it was extremely difficult for me, even nearly 20 years later.

Physical and Sexual Health Injuries

Survivors reported chronic pain, weight changes, sleep disturbances, fatigue, and somatic trauma responses. Nine reported dissociative freeze responses during sexual intimacy, and another disclosed pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection because of the abuse. These experiences reinforce that clergy sexual exploitation must be understood as gender-based violence with both psychological and physiological consequences. When asked about their physical and sexual injuries, participants noted,

My body freezes with my husband.

I have fibromyalgia; hypothyroidism, [and] agoraphobia.

My onset of autoimmune illness [the] Dr said [was] triggered by stress.

These injuries are consistent with the literature on sexual trauma and mirror findings in intimate partner violence studies (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ofir-Lavee, 2020).

Financial Injuries

Financial harms were diverse and under-acknowledged. Five survivors who had worked for the church had lost their jobs, while some participants noted they had missed career opportunities, incurred costly legal and therapeutic expenses, and suffered long-term economic instability. Some had to sell homes, abandon studies, or withdraw from work. One respondent noted,

I could not complete the study I was doing at the time and consequently lost my career trajectory. I had to sell my apartment due to the job loss. I could not work full-time for several years due to the stress and would only work for myself.

Additionally, survivors described how prosperity theology and tithe teachings were used to manipulate them into over-giving, thereby compounding spiritual and financial exploitation. It is clear from the multifaceted injuries presented that clergy sexual exploitation of adult congregation members leaves lasting imprints across every domain of their lives. As one survivor expressed,

It is always there, lurking around like a black shadow over my life.

Another noted,

The scars are written on my soul and will always be there.

Theme 3: Experiences of Therapeutic Help-Seeking: Help and Harm

In addition to describing the harms of clergy sexual exploitation, participants reflected on their experiences of counselling. Seventy per cent of participants had sought counselling. For many, trauma-informed counselling was described as lifesaving, validating, and essential in beginning to process what had occurred. As one respondent shared,

I would not be where I am today without the support of a trauma-informed counsellor who understands Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse.

Another described how she,

saw a great trauma-informed counsellor who was immediately able to see that I had been groomed and assaulted and had not had an affair. Her support through the disclosure to the church and the police was invaluable and saved my life and my sanity.

However, not all experiences were positive. Several participants reported harmful encounters with counsellors who minimised the abuse or reframed it through spiritualised lenses that deepened their shame. One noted,

I definitely wasted a few years in the beginning by seeing a very inept “Christian Counsellor/Psychologist”. He was very insistent that I went through everything I’d been through because “God had ordained” me to be a Moses or Joseph of my generation.

This respondent added that the counsellor,

did not identify the abuse as sexual assault and instead spiritualised the events as testing and trials allowed by God.

Another respondent further stated,

The counsellor didn't understand [health condition] and didn't help me to understand what had happened. I had to research clergy abuse ... gaslighting and grooming to unpack what had happened.

Some participants had mixed experiences, acknowledging that while counselling helped alleviate symptoms such as anxiety and low self-worth, they never disclosed the abuse owing to fear or shame. For example, one respondent stated,

My counselling has been helpful to alleviate anxiety and rebuild my self-worth. But I have never shared my experience with the counsellor.

Another responded,

I have had therapy and been on medication for anxiety, but I have never told the therapist or doctor about the sex with the pastor. How can you tell someone that without the shame that will come with this. This survey is the first time I've shared this.

These varied responses highlight the critical importance of counsellors being both trauma-informed and abuse-informed, particularly in recognising and naming the dynamics of abuse in faith contexts.

Discussion

The survey results underscore that clergy sexual exploitation produces widespread and enduring harms that cannot be reduced to individual incidents of misconduct. The injuries described by participants were interconnected and cumulative, reverberating across every domain of life. Crucially, these findings demonstrate that what may appear as sexual compliance should not be interpreted as consent. Instead, such responses reflect the systematic erosion of agency under undue influence and coercive control (Stark, 2007). Survivors' accounts of emotional loyalty, the urge to protect their abuser, ongoing confusion, and lingering attachment illustrate dynamics of coercive entrapment (Stark, 2007) and trauma bonding—survival-based attachments that develop when an abuser alternates harm with kindness, remorse, or spiritual intimacy (Carnes, 1997). Similar dynamics have been documented not only in abusive intimate partner relationships but also in the context of sex trafficking, wherein trauma bonding is recognised as a powerful mechanism of entrapment and silence (Casassa et al., 2022; J. Herman, 1992). In clergy abuse contexts, this bond is further intensified by theological narratives of grace, forgiveness, and obedience, which delay recognition of abuse and entrench survivors in guilt and responsibility (Kennedy, 2009; Kim & Shaw, 2024).

The injuries reported across domains mirror the findings of existing trauma research into child clergy sexual abuse (Blakemore et al., 2017) and sexual violence (AIHW, 2024) while also extending them by demonstrating the lifelong impacts of clergy sexual exploitation of adult women. The abuse of spiritual authority had particularly devastating consequences. Survivors experienced what Freyd (1996) termed betrayal trauma: harm not only from an individual but from someone representing safety, faith, and God. This betrayal often resulted in a collapse of identity, a loss of faith, and significant existential confusion. For many, faith had previously been a source of meaning, but after the abuse, it became bound up with grief, vigilance, or total disengagement. The concept of “soul rape” (Garland, 2006) resonates deeply here, as survivors not only lost trust in their abuser but also in God, their faith communities, and themselves.

These dynamics contribute to what has been described as spiritual devastation, that is, the loss of trust in God, faith communities, and spiritual identity following betrayal by a pastor (Pargament et al., 2008). Survivors’ shame and guilt were compounded by patriarchal theological narratives that displaced responsibility from perpetrators onto victims, as found in previous victim-based studies (see Kennedy, 2009). Survivors also experienced emotional fragmentation, namely, the disconnection and conflict survivors endure when trauma forces them to compartmentalise or suppress feelings to survive (J. Herman, 1992; J. L. Herman, 2023). In this study, this was noted when participants described the dissonance between faith, identity, and trauma, leaving them feeling torn between contradictory emotions of loyalty, love, fear, anger, and shame. Such fragmentation undermines survivors’ sense of emotional coherence and contributes to the enduring psychological toll of abuse. Financial harms, though less frequently examined in the literature, emerged as significant and under-recognised, pointing to the need to frame clergy exploitation as a form of gender-based violence with socio-economic dimensions.

Implications for Counselling Practice

In navigating these complex harms, counselling played a critical yet uneven role in survivors’ recovery. Many participants described trauma-informed therapy as validating and essential in beginning to process the abuse. Others, however, reported minimisation or harmful spiritualisation, which compounded feelings of shame and confusion. These mixed accounts underscore the need for counsellors and mental health practitioners to be both trauma-informed and abuse-informed, and to pay particular attention to the dynamics of spiritual coercion, grooming, and betrayal trauma. Effective support requires a trauma- and abuse-informed, spiritually sensitive approach, which can be considered across the following domains:

1. **Recognition and Disclosure.** Survivors may struggle with delayed recognition of abuse and may find disclosure extremely difficult due to secrecy, shame, or fear of rejection

(Celenza, 2011; Freyd, 1996). Providing validating resources such as survivor narratives or specialist literature and support networks can normalise reactions, reduce shame, and foster connection with others who have endured similar harm². Counsellors can validate disclosure as an act of courage and avoid any stance that risks replicating institutional betrayal.

2. **Safety and Regulation.** Survivors may present with trauma symptoms resembling those seen in intimate partner violence, while also carrying additional layers of spiritual confusion, shame, and institutional betrayal. Emotional safety must precede trauma work (J. Herman, 1992). Survivors may not be ready, or may never choose, to disclose detailed memories, and counsellors should never press disclosure (J. Herman, 1992; J. L. Herman, 2023). Instead, the focus should be on stabilisation, regulation, somatic, and grounding strategies that provide survivors with tools to manage overwhelming emotions.
3. **Meaning-Making and Spiritual Injury.** Institutional betrayal often results in significant spiritual injuries and identity crises, especially when theology is weaponised to coerce sexual acts, silence, or shame (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Counsellors can support survivors in re-examining or reconstructing their spirituality in ways that foster safety, agency, and personal meaning (Pargament et al., 2008).
4. **Relational Repair, Justice, and Agency.** Recovery involves rebuilding relational trust, re-establishing autonomy, and regaining one's voice (J. Herman, 1992). Justice and repair are also vital dimensions of healing, as survivors often seek acknowledgement, accountability, and institutional responsibility for the harms they endured (J. L. Herman, 2023). Counsellors can help survivors frame the abuse through lenses of power and coercion rather than mutuality or moral failing, emphasising that the pastor alone is responsible for the misconduct (Celenza, 2011). Counsellors supporting victim-survivors of clergy abuse must remain alert to the risks of minimising or spiritualising the abuse and engage in supervision and reflective practice to uphold ethical, survivor-centred care.

2 A useful resource for those affected by adult clergy sexual abuse: <https://clergysexualmisconduct.com>

Limitations

This research relied on an anonymous online survey, and the sample size, although rich in narrative detail, was relatively small and may not have captured the full diversity of impacts experienced by adult survivors in other denominational or cultural contexts. The absence of follow-up interviews limited the ability to explore the depth and nuance of individual impacts over time. Additionally, the findings are drawn from self-report data, which may be influenced by memory recall, emotional state, or perceived safety in disclosure. Despite these limitations, the study provides critical insights into the complex and often under-recognised harms experienced by adult survivors of clergy sexual exploitation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse of adults produces significant and enduring harm. The responses of 33 survivors revealed patterns of compliance and entrapment that cannot be mistaken for consent; rather, they illustrate the systematic erosion of agency under coercive control, trauma bonding, and undue influence. The injuries described were cumulative and wide-ranging, encompassing spiritual devastation, psychological and emotional distress, relational breakdown, physical health consequences, and financial instability. Accounts of therapeutic help-seeking underscored both the potential of trauma-informed counselling to be lifesaving and the risks of further harm when abuse was minimised or reframed through spiritualised lenses.

Taken together, these findings confirm that adult clergy sexual exploitation must be recognised as a form of gender-based violence, comparable in its coercive mechanisms and impacts to domestic violence. Addressing these harms requires therapeutic, legal, and ecclesiastical frameworks that validate survivors' experiences. Trauma-informed, spiritually sensitive, and abuse-aware practice is essential to effective support. Equally, legal reforms are urgently needed to recognise that professional and spiritual authority fundamentally undermine the possibility of meaningful consent.

Published: October 20, 2025 AEDT.



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