



Should pastors date congregation members?

June 22, 1992 | By Susan Hogan/Albach | Susan Hogan/Albach, Knight-Ridder News Service

The Rev. Steve Smith knows what it's like to have church members play matchmaker. It's subtle. A church member takes him to dinner and spends the evening talking about an eligible granddaughter. But the 28-year-old single pastor, also knows how to get out of a sticky situation.

"Oh gee, have you heard I'm engaged?" asks Mr. Smith, who serves a Lutheran church in Virginia, Minn. The truth works every time. The matchmaker's fantasy sizzles. Talk quickly shifts to mashed potatoes.

It used to be that single pastors were expected to find a mate in congregations they served. And church members eagerly served as matrimonial agents.

But the rules have changed.

New awareness about personal boundaries and sexual exploitation have churches re-examining whether dating relationships and even close friendships are appropriate between men and women of the cloth and those sitting in the pew.

What was once considered harmless and natural has suddenly become taboo.

Six months ago, a Lutheran synod in Minnesota issued a no-dating policy. The United Church of Christ in Minnesota has likewise drawn strict guidelines on dating and friendships.

The rule for pastors is simple: Don't do it. If you don't want to open yourself to charges of sexual misconduct, then don't go gaga over someone to whom you serve Holy Communion.

The changes are meant to sensitize pastors and protect church members from exploitation. But many pastors and church members say the lines drawn are too rigid and extreme.

After all, pastors are human. They need friends and companionship, too.

"It would seem logical that a pastor's own parish would provide contacts for him or her to date, said Barbara Benson Moody of Superior, Wis. "I don't feel that professionalism would be compromised at all."

A prohibition of dating and friendships isn't always realistic, said Elizabeth Stellas, who helps denominations develop policies about clergy sexual misconduct. When relationships develop, the parties involved must choose between their spiritual and social bonds.

They can't have it both ways.

"In most cases we suggest that the two people sit down and say if we want to have a dating relationship, we have to end our relationship as pastor and congregant," said Ms. Stellas, from the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence in Seattle.

The new rules mean church members who enter a dating relationship could suffer the loss of their pastor and their congregation. Or it could mean that pastors might leave a congregation in order to date one of its members.

Ms. Stellas also recommends pastors make it publicly known when a pastor-parishioner relationship becomes a dating relationship. Secrecy is the road to confusion and scandal within congregations.