

“Shepherd My Sheep”: Clerical Readiness to Meet Psychological and Existential Needs from Victims of Sexual Abuse

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Abstract Consequences of sexual abuse are highly associated with psychological suffering. The minister can be the first person a victim, belonging to a Christian congregation, turns to for support. This study investigated the reported readiness among ministers of the Church of Sweden to disclose ongoing sexual abuse and meet psychological as well as existential needs of victims. Questionnaires were administered to ministers in all dioceses. A majority, 77%, reported that they as professionals had met victims of sexual abuse and they estimated their readiness for this task as high. However, there is still a need to promote further an accepting attitude and to establish cooperation with social authorities and non-confessional professionals.

Keywords Sexual abuse · Christian congregations · Pastoral care

During times of crises and personal distress Christian people around the world often turn to their ministers and congregations for support, comfort, and help in understanding what has happened to them. This is true also in Sweden, despite the fact that, like the other Scandinavian countries, Sweden is a postmodern society characterized by a secular rationality (DeMarinis 2003). Davie (2000) concludes that, rather than being secularized, Scandinavians are non-church-going with a tendency to turn to congregations at times of crises. Antonovsky (1991) emphasizes the need for a “sense of coherence.” In a number of studies, starting from 1979, Antonovsky showed that under otherwise similar circumstances there is an important difference between individuals’ psychological health depending on the way they interpret their reality (Kallenberg and Larsson 2004). Being able to comprehend tragedy and to transform it into a meaningful understanding in many ways constitutes the core of successful coping and adjustment. For many individuals religion fulfills this role of attributing meaning (Spilka et al. 2003). In 1946 Frankl (2006) published his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, in which he formulated that the human capacity to attribute meaning to what happens to them is by nature given as a function for survival, and he also defined

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religion as a quest for an ultimate meaning. If the individual does not manage to find meaning in tragedies and traumatic events this can cause the individual to question fundamental assumptions and systems of belief and eventually lead to existential crisis (Herman 1992).

Since the 1970's and the early 1980's, focus on sexual abuse has increased in Western societies (Fortney et al. 2007), and one of the most published issues of our time concerns sexual victimization (Edwards and Hensley 2001). At the same time the Church of Sweden has undergone changes, with an increasing emphasis on pastoral care functions to handle crises and care for traumatized individuals (DeMarinis 2003). It is, however, hard to acknowledge and admit the phenomena of sexual abuse and professionals have difficulties dealing with the issue of sexuality being used in an assaulting way (Tidefors and Drougge 2006). Professionals are also uncomfortable with sexual issues in a broader sense and professionals "are so unprepared to deal with the shocking revelations of clients that they may contribute to the latter's problem" (Hacker and Rembor 1988, p. 13). Most experts fail to examine the sexual aspect of sexual abuse. This failure can be understood in terms of general societal norms, which connect sexuality with guilt and shame (Hacker and Rembor 1988; Tidefors and Drougge 2006).

Out of our earlier research interest, partly concerning the functioning of Christian symbols and themes in recovering from sexual abuse, partly concerning perpetrators of child sexual abuse, an interest emerged to study ministers' readiness to meet psychological and existential needs of victims of sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse and the Christian context

Consequences of being sexually abused are highly associated to psychological dysfunction. Victims, in many studies called "survivors," often respond to the abuse by experiencing a number of posttraumatic stress-symptoms. Many victims fall into substance abuse, eating disorders, self-destructiveness, compulsory sexual behavior and compulsory risk-taking. Sexually abused individuals often lack self-confidence and display a great complex of trust problems (Christianson 2002; Herman 1992). If the victim is tied to a religious congregation, there is a risk that this lack of trust is generalized to ministry, to the congregation, and even to God (Moran 1994). The victim can feel utterly abandoned and betrayed, not only by humans, but also by the good God that allowed the abuse to take place (Ganje-Fling and McCarthy 1996; Imbens and Jonker 1992; Kane et al. 1993; Russell 1999) and the abuse can therefore result in, not only psychological damage, but also in a religious trauma (Rossetti 1995). When brooding on vast existential questions, victims might come up with answers that run the risk of becoming static, and the individual's concepts around meaning, good and evil can become rigid and closed to questioning (Ganje-Fling and McCarthy 1996). Sexual attitudes, the glorification of suffering and the virtue of forgiving, are issues which are often discussed and described in specific ways within Christian belief systems. Such themes can increase the risk of victims blaming themselves for the abuse and enhance feelings of shame and of not being worthy (Ganje-Fling and McCarthy 1996; Kane et al. 1993; Lemoncelli and Carey 1996; Moran 1994; Redmond 1989).

Christian themes can affect the victims' attempts at cognitively understanding the abuse, but the abuse, in turn, can also affect how Christian symbols and themes are received and interpreted in an interaction process (Rudolfsson 2006). For example, Christianity has through several themes and stories come to honor martyrdom and suffering as glorious and

desirable, not least through the passion of Christ (Ganzevoort 2001). However, Christianity also bears a strength in offering the abused individual other attributions and the possibility of change. The victim might then be led through a process that stops the victimization and turns him/her into a survivor (Fortune 1989).

Unlike other therapeutic and helping professions, the minister may be familiar with, or even have an ongoing relation to the victim. This may lead to a situation where the minister is the first person the victim is able to trust and confide in (Shannon-Lewy and Dull 2005). A review of clergy referral patterns by Meylink and Gorsuch (1987) found that the ministers referred less than 10% of the individuals seeking help to mental specialists. So it seems quite common that members of the clergy, after their initial contact with the victim, are reluctant to refer him/her to other professionals. It is however possible to increase referrals through education. After a number of workshops together with family medicine doctors in Michigan, the referrals from ministers to mental health specialists increased dramatically. These referral patterns show the importance of ministers trusting other professions, and the importance of knowing whom to contact for help outside ministry (Weikart 1986). In a Swedish study, ministers of the Church of Sweden and pastors in two of the Free Swedish Church traditions (Swedish Mission Church and the Swedish Baptist Church) were asked about areas where they felt they needed extra training, in order to be well equipped in the twenty-first century (DeMarinis 2003). A majority emphasized pastoral psychology/pastoral care as one of these areas and expressed a need for extra training in psychology and in the psychology of religion.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the reported readiness among ministers of the Church of Sweden to disclose ongoing sexual abuse and to meet psychological and religious existential needs from victims of sexual abuse within or in connection to the congregation.

Method

Data was gathered by a questionnaire administered to ministers throughout Sweden. This method was chosen partly because it is an efficient way of collecting a large amount of data, partly as a way of reaching ministers educated and working in different parts of the country. The ministers were asked to estimate their readiness both to disclose ongoing sexual abuse and to care for sexually abused individuals. In estimating their readiness for pastoral care, the ministers were asked to estimate their readiness from both a psychological, i.e., their knowledge of psychological consequences, and a theological aspect, i.e., their ability to meet existential and religious needs by using different Christian symbols that facilitate the recovery and minimize the risk of further trauma.

Procedure

Before administering the questionnaire, an early version was tested and thoroughly discussed with a female minister and as a result some changes and additional notes were made. The questionnaire, which was dispatched by mail, was accompanied by a brief presentation of the authors, the purpose of the study and the disposition of the questionnaire. Information was given about the definition of sexual abuse, i.e., as sexual actions directed towards a person against his/her will or against a person who lacks ability to both comprehend and to consent. This definition emanates from the Swedish legislation (Criminal Code 2005). Due to the complex area under investigation a brief presentation

regarding the potential interaction process between sexual abuse and Christian themes accompanied the questionnaire. The presentation of the study also pointed to the fact that it was aiming towards the future, with the hope of identifying potential strengths of Christianity in caring for victims of sexual abuse. The presentation ended with guarantees concerning the anonymity of participants and the confidentiality with which all information was to be handled.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of twenty questions, mainly formulated as statements, six of which were divided into two parts, i.e., a and b. At the bottom of the questionnaire the respondents were given the option of commenting upon their answers and upon the study in general.

Examples of statements included in the questionnaire:

- I feel that there is an accepting attitude towards discussing and engaging in the topic of sexual abuse within: (a) the Church of Sweden, (b) Swedish society in general.
- I have previously reflected upon my readiness to disclose ongoing sexual abuse and to care for sexually abused individuals within, or in connection to, the congregation.
- I have previously been in contact with the problem, i.e., either disclosed ongoing sexual abuse or cared for sexually abused individuals: (a) as a professional, (b) outside of my profession.

The questionnaire also included questions concerning knowledge about and levels of trust in members of other professions and about ways of finding necessary support when either disclosing ongoing sexual abuse or caring for sexually abused individuals. An estimated evaluation of the clerical education with respect to how knowledge is obtained concerning ways of caring for sexually abused individuals, both psychologically and theologically, was also included.

Respondents

The sample was randomly selected from all 13 dioceses in Sweden, by the principle of centre and periphery. All diocesan capitals were represented, with congregations from both the centre and the outskirts of the city. Both small and large cities as well as rural areas were included. To simplify the process of identifying ministers within the congregations, merely congregations with web pages including lists of personnel were used.

The questionnaire was sent to 150 respondents, 61 women and 89 men, resulting in 86 answers. Two of the questionnaires did not reach the respondents and were returned to sender. Four weeks after the initial dispatch a reminder was sent out. The reminder resulted in an additional nine responses, which meant that a total of 95 responses were received, and the final response rate reached 63%. The 53 respondents not responding consisted of 31 men and 25 women. The response rate for the males was approximately 65% (58 men) and for females 59% (36 women). One respondent did not answer the question about gender. The oldest respondent was 67 years old and the youngest was 25 years old. The range concerning respondents' year of birth is shown in Table 1. The respondents were categorized into five different classes, depending on which decade they were born in. Due to the fact that only one of the respondents fell into the age category of "year of birth 1980-," a new category labeled "year of birth 1970–1982" was created in some of the analyses, in order for the post-hoc tests to be carried out.

Table 1 Year of birth

Year of birth	Frequency	Percent
1940–1949	31	32.6
1950–1959	35	36.8
1960–1969	17	17.9
1970–1979	9	9.5
1980-	1	1.1
Missing	2	2.1
Total	95	100.0

The two ministers with the longest working experience were ordained in 1965 and the minister with the shortest working experience was ordained in 2006. Three other respondents were ordained in the 1960's, 47 respondents between 1970 and 1989, 28 respondents in the 1990's and 14 respondents were ordained after the year 2000. One respondent did not answer this question. Twenty-five of the respondents took the opportunity to make their own comments. Some of these comments will be considered in the discussion.

Analysis

This field of research is relatively new, and as a consequence no hypotheses could be formulated based on the results of previous studies.

An independent samples *t*-test was used to estimate differences between female and male respondents according to (1) estimated prevalence of sexual abuse; (2) estimation of the clerical educations' ability to procure both psychological and theological knowledge.

Independent samples *t*-test was used to evaluate the differences between (1) reported readiness to disclose ongoing sexual abuse and reported readiness to care for sexually abused individuals, both psychologically and theologically; (2) reported readiness to care for sexually abused individuals psychologically and reported readiness to care for sexually abused individuals theologically.

Pearson correlations were used to estimate the relations between variables concerning (1) readiness to care for victims and need for further education; (2) readiness to care for sexually abused individuals and knowledge about sexual abuse; (3) reflections about sexual abuse and experiences of either disclosing ongoing sexual abuse or caring for sexually abused individuals; (4) estimation of prevalence of sexual abuse and the need for more information about how to care for victims; (5) wanting more information on how to disclose ongoing sexual abuse and the need for ministers to engage themselves in the topic of sexual abuse.

One-way ANOVA was used to estimate differences between older and younger respondents according to (1) reported readiness to care for victims, psychologically and theologically; (2) perceived attitudes towards the topic of sexual abuse; (3) perceived openness concerning sexual abuse. The Tukey-test was used for post-hoc analyzes.

Standard multiple regressions were used to investigate the relation between (1) reported readiness to disclose sexual abuse; (2) reported readiness to care for victims psychologically; (3) reported readiness to care for victims theologically. Independent variables were: Further education in behavioural science/pastoral care outside of ministry; Previous experience of either revealing ongoing sexual abuse or caring for sexually abused individuals, (a) as a professional; (b) outside of ministry; Previous levels of reflection on the topic; Evaluation of the clerical education; Levels of received knowledge about sexual

abuse outside clerical education; Estimated levels of knowledge about authorities and organisations to turn to for support. In the standard multiple regression, the questions concerning the ability of clerical education to procure both psychological and theological knowledge of sexual abuse were combined into one variable, with a mean of both responses.

Descriptive statistics were used in describing the results regarding the following items: The respondents estimation of prevalence of sexual abuse; The respondents own experiences of caring for victims both as professionals and outside their profession; Experiences of earlier education and needs for further education; Knowledge about and attitudes towards other professionals working with victims; Reflections about sexual abuse; Perceived possibilities to find support within the Church of Sweden; Attitudes towards discussing and engaging in this topic; Perceived openness towards sexual abuse. The response alternatives were coded into numbers ranging from 4="agrees completely/to a high degree" to 1="does not agree at all/to no degree at all." The "do not know" response alternative was coded as "missing" in analyses comparing means. In some cases the four response alternatives have been combined into two categories as (1) "agrees" and (2) "does not agree" or (1) "to a high degree" and (2) "to a small degree." Cohen (1988) was used to determine the effect sizes.

Results

Estimation of prevalence and of earlier experiences

The prevalence of sexual abuse was estimated as "common" by 48% of the respondents and as "unusual" by 26%. Three respondents estimated it as "very common" and only one respondent estimated it as "very unusual." Eight respondents did not answer this question, and 13 respondents chose the "do not know"-alternative. An independent samples *t*-test showed that there was a significant difference between the estimated prevalence of sexual abuse between women ($N=26$, $M=2.9$, $s=0.5$) and men ($N=49$, $M=2.6$, $s=0.6$), $t=2.96$, $p<0.01$. Women estimated the prevalence as higher. Seventy seven percent of the respondents ($N=73$) answered that they had previously either disclosed ongoing sexual abuse or cared for sexually abused individuals, as ministers. More than half, 59% ($N=56$), had been in contact with aspects of sexual abuse outside of their profession. In the case of either disclosing ongoing sexual abuse or caring for sexually abused individuals outside of their profession, the missing data were $N=6$, in comparison to "as a professional" where the missing data were zero. About one third (33%) of the respondents reported that they had received further education in behavioral science and/or pastoral care outside of the ministry, and about half of the respondents (48%) valued their previous working experience, outside of the ministry, as an asset in their current pastoral care functions.

Readiness to either disclose ongoing sexual abuse or care for sexually abused individuals

On the main questions under investigation, i.e., the estimated readiness to either disclose ongoing sexual abuse or care for sexually abused individuals, results showed a tendency towards reported readiness to disclose sexual abuse (Table 2) being lower than the readiness to care for sexually abused individuals (Tables 3 and 4).

The difference between the estimated readiness to disclose sexual abuse ($M=2.6$, $s=0.7$) and the readiness to care for sexually abused individuals psychologically ($M=2.3$, $s=0.8$)

Table 2 “I feel ready and able to disclose sexual abuse, within or in connection to the congregation”

	Frequency	Percent
Agrees completely	3	3.2
Agrees	36	37.9
Does not agree	42	44.2
Does not agree at all	6	6.3
No opinion	6	6.3
Missing	2	2.1
Total	95	100.0

was significant, paired *t*-test, $t(84)=3.7$, $p<0.01$. The respondents estimated their ability to care for victims psychologically as higher than their readiness to disclose sexual abuse. The difference was also significant between reported readiness to disclose sexual abuse ($M=2.4$, $s=0.8$) and reported readiness to care for sexually abused individuals theologically ($M=2.8$, $s=0.7$), paired *t*-test, $t(80)=-5.1$, $p<0.01$. The reported readiness to care for victims theologically was higher than the reported readiness to disclose sexual abuse.

The difference between reported readiness to care for sexually abused individuals psychologically ($M=2.7$, $s=0.8$) and theologically ($M=2.8$, $s=0.7$) was also significant, paired *t*-test, $t(87)=-2.42$, $p<0.05$. The respondents estimated their readiness to care for victims theologically as higher than their readiness to care for victims psychologically.

Older versus younger respondents

A one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference between older respondents, born in the 1940's ($N=29$, $M=2.9$, $s=0.6$) and younger respondents, born after 1970 ($N=10$, $M=2.1$, $s=1.1$) in their reported ability to care for victims psychologically, $F(3, 87)=2.98$, $p<0.05$. The older respondents reported a higher readiness to care for victims psychologically (see Fig. 1). No significant difference was found between the respondents' age in their answers about caring for victims theologically.

The role of education, knowledge and reflection

A significant correlation between reported readiness to care for victims and further education in behavioral science/pastoral care was found, both in caring psychologically, $r(89)=0.23$ and in caring theologically, $r(85)=0.26$, $p<0.05$. The reported readiness to care for sexually abused individuals also correlated with levels of knowledge about sexual

Table 3 “I feel ready and able to care for sexually abused individuals, psychologically”

	Frequency	Percent
Agrees completely	9	9.5
Agrees	51	53.7
Does not agree	25	26.3
Does not agree at all	7	7.4
No opinion	2	2.1
Missing	1	1.1
Total	95	100.0

Table 4 “I feel ready and able to care for sexually abused individuals, theologically”

	Frequency	Percent
Agrees completely	10	10.5
Agrees	55	57.9
Does not agree	21	22.1
Does not agree at all	2	2.1
No opinion	6	6.3
Missing	1	1.1
Total	95	100.0

abuse, received outside of the clerical education, both psychologically $r(88)=0.57$ and theologically $r(83)=0.46$, $p<0.01$. Respondents who reported having further education and high levels of received knowledge also reported a higher readiness to care for victims.

Standard multiple regression analysis showed that the reported readiness to disclose sexual abuse was to a large extent, $R^2=0.46$, determined by the independent variables in Table 5. The reported levels of knowledge about sexual abuse received outside clerical education had the largest effect on the reported readiness to disclose ongoing sexual abuse, within or in connection to the congregation (Table 5).

The same independent variables were shown to have a large effect on the reported readiness to care for victims, psychologically, $R^2=0.47$, and theologically, $R^2=0.48$ (Tables 6 and 7). In caring for victims psychologically, the evaluation of clerical education, levels of knowledge about sexual abuse received outside clerical education, and reported levels of knowledge about authorities and organizations to turn to for support had the largest effect (Table 6). In caring for victims theologically the evaluation of clerical education, and reported levels of knowledge about authorities and organizations to turn to for support showed the largest effect (Table 7).

A minority of the respondents, 34%, stated that they had previously reflected upon their readiness to either disclose ongoing sexual abuse or care for sexually abused individuals, while 63% of the respondents estimated their degree of previous reflection as small. Earlier

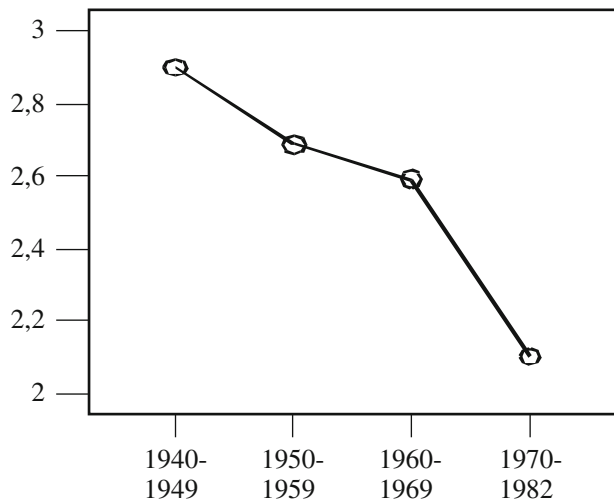
Fig. 1 Year of birth and estimated readiness to care for victims, psychologically

Table 5 Regression analysis, reported readiness to disclose ongoing sexual abuse

Independent variable	Beta	<i>t</i>	Sig.
(Constant)		2.27	0.026
Further education in behavioural science and/or pastoral care outside of ministry	-0.079	-0.84	0.406
Previous experience of disclosing ongoing sexual abuse and/or caring for sexually abused individuals, (a) as a professional	-0.043	-0.42	0.676
Previous experience of disclosing ongoing sexual abuse and/or caring for sexually abused individuals, (b) outside of ministry	-0.053	-0.58	0.567
Previous levels of reflection on the topic	0.150	1.34	0.186
Evaluation of the clerical education	0.126	1.33	0.189
Levels of received knowledge about sexual abuse, outside clerical education	0.482	3.93	0.001
Estimated levels of knowledge about authorities and organisations to turn to for support	0.172	1.64	0.106

reflection on and experience of either disclosing ongoing sexual abuse or caring for sexually abused individuals, both as a professional, $r(90)=0.28$ and outside of ministry $r(84)=0.24$ was found to correlate, $p<0.05$. The amount of reported earlier reflection increased when the respondents also reported earlier experience of dealing with this type of problem.

On the question of whether the respondents felt they had knowledge about organizations and public authorities they could turn to for support and help, if disclosing sexual abuse and when caring for victims, 75% agreed and 23% did not agree. The levels of confidence in other professions, e.g., psychologists, social workers etc., were overall high; 91% of the respondents agreed to the statement that they felt confidence in other professions for receiving support and help in caring for sexually abused individuals. However, 24% of the respondents did not agree to the statement that they felt confidence in finding support within the Church of Sweden.

Clerical education received quite low scores in its estimated ability to procure knowledge about ways of caring for sexually abused individuals. On the question of whether the clerical education had procured psychological knowledge only one respondent agreed completely, 18% agreed and 78% of the respondents did not agree or did not agree at all. On the question of whether the clerical education had the ability to procure theological knowledge in caring for victims, 21% agreed and 74% of the respondents did not agree. No significant differences were found between the different universities. There

Table 6 Regression analysis, reported readiness to care for victims psychologically

Independent variable	Beta	<i>t</i>	Sig.
(Constant)		0.57	0.570
Further education in behavioural science and/or pastoral care outside of ministry	0.078	0.86	0.394
Previous experience of disclosing ongoing sexual abuse and/or caring for sexually abused individuals, a) as a professional	0.021	0.21	0.832
Previous experience of disclosing ongoing sexual abuse and/or caring for sexually abused individuals, b) outside of ministry	0.005	0.06	0.951
Previous levels of reflection on the topic	0.089	0.82	0.414
Evaluation of the clerical education	0.199	2.18	0.032
Levels of received knowledge about sexual abuse, outside clerical education	0.338	2.87	0.005
Estimated levels of knowledge about authorities and organisations to turn to for support	0.268	2.66	0.009

Table 7 Regression analysis, reported readiness to care for victims theologically

Independent variable	Beta	<i>t</i>	Sig.
(Constant)		0.63	0.533
Further education in behavioural science and/or pastoral care outside of ministry	0.139	1.52	0.133
Previous experience of disclosing ongoing sexual abuse and/or caring for sexually abused individuals, a) as a professional	0.133	1.35	0.180
Previous experience of disclosing ongoing sexual abuse and/or caring for sexually abused individuals, b) outside of ministry	0.097	1.08	0.286
Previous levels of reflection on the topic	-0.037	-0.34	0.736
Evaluation of the clerical education	0.211	2.30	0.024
Levels of received knowledge about sexual abuse, outside of the clerical education	0.138	1.16	0.249
Estimated levels of knowledge about authorities and organisations to turn to for support	0.439	4.33	0.001

was a tendency for women ($N=36$, $M=1.8$, $s=0.7$) to estimate the clerical educations' ability to procure psychological knowledge as lower, than did the men ($N=56$, $M=2.1$, $s=0.7$) *t*-test, $t=-1.84$, $p=0.099$.

When asked if the respondents would like to have more knowledge about disclosing sexual abuse and caring for sexually abused individuals, a majority of the respondents agreed: 86% of the respondents wanted to know more about disclosing sexual abuse. Ninety-two percent wanted more knowledge about how to care for victims psychologically and 85% of the respondents wanted more knowledge about how to care for victims theologically.

The analyses also showed a significant correlation between the estimated prevalence of sexual abuse and wanting more knowledge about how to care for victims both psychologically, $r(72)=0.29$ $p<0.05$ and theologically, $r(72)=0.25$, $p<0.05$. A significant correlation was also found between wanting more knowledge about how to disclose sexual abuse and agreeing with the statement that it was important for ministers to engage themselves in the topic of sexual abuse, $r(85)=0.28$, $p<0.01$.

Perceived openness

A majority of the respondents reported that they experienced an accepting attitude towards discussing and engaging in the topic of sexual abuse, both within the Church of Sweden and in Swedish society in general. There were no significant differences between the sexes on this issue.

A one way ANOVA showed that respondents born in the 1950's ($N=32$, $M=2.8$, $s=0.7$) reported a less accepting attitude within the Church of Sweden, than did respondents born

Fig. 2 Year of birth and perceived accepting attitudes to engage in the topic, within the Church of Sweden

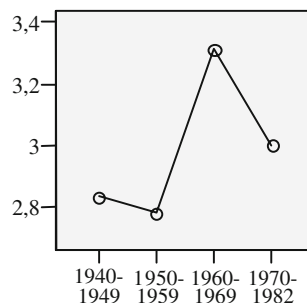
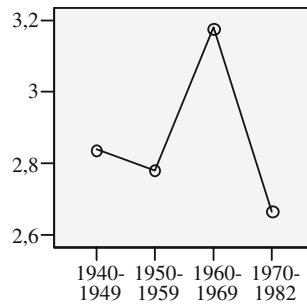


Fig. 3 Year of birth and perceived accepting attitudes to engage in the topic, in Swedish society in general



in the 1960's ($N=16$, $M=3.3$, $s=0.5$), $F(3, 83)=3.20$, $p<0.05$, (see Fig. 2). A significant difference was also found between respondents born in 1960–1969 ($N=17$, $M=3.2$, $s=0.5$) and in 1970–1982 ($N=9$, $M=2.7$, $s=0.7$) regarding the perceived openness in Swedish society in general, $F(3, 85)=2.64$, $p=0.06$ (see Fig. 3). Respondents born in the 1960's reported a more accepting attitude.

Discussion

The high number of respondents who reported previous experience of disclosing ongoing sexual abuse or caring for sexually abused individuals within or in connection to the congregation point to the necessity for ministers to be prepared to meet such situations. As mentioned earlier, to meet and to care for victims of sexual abuse is not an easy task, and it could be seen as problematic that 23% of the respondents reported low knowledge about authorities and organizations to turn to for support and help and that 24% of the respondents stated that they did not feel confident in finding support from within the church. The clerical education also received low estimations of its ability to procure knowledge about sexual abuse. This lack of knowledge can partly be explained by the fact that a majority of the respondents had been ordained in the 1970's–1990's and research on the phenomena of sexual abuse is relatively new and was therefore not a natural part of the education of that time.

Some differences were found between the male and female respondents. The female respondents estimated the prevalence of sexual abuse as higher. Similar results are found in other studies, as for example Jackson and Nutall (1994) who also found that the propensity to value allegations as true is higher among women than among men. This “female position” towards sexual abuse may explain why the female respondents reported a lower estimation on clerical education concerning sexual abuse. They see these questions as important and put higher demands on education to procure knowledge within this area. In order to compensate for shortcomings within the education to procure the needed knowledge, there seems to be a tendency among the respondents to turn to other sources to learn about these topics. But the correlation between received knowledge, outside of ministry, and reported readiness to disclose and care for sexually abused individuals, both psychologically and theologically, shows that congregations might need to take their own responsibility to engage in the topic. To reflect is in some ways related to education, and a somewhat strange finding is that although 63% of the respondents reported that they had not previously reflected upon their readiness to deal with sexual abuse victims, a majority still felt prepared and ready to care for victims theologically. Perhaps this can be understood as valuing knowledge and reflection low, and that ministers rely on their faith in God when

caring for victims. The fact that as many as 14% of the respondents reported that they did not want any more knowledge about the subject might reflect this reliance on religion, but it could also reflect the sensitivity and controversy of the topic, especially in the light of the history of negative views and strong taboos concerning sexuality within Christianity. Eight respondents did not take a stand regarding the statement about prevalence of sexual abuse, and 13 respondents chose the “do not know” alternative. This may perhaps also reflect the sensitivity of the topic. Another difference, however a small one, was found between answers to the question about either disclosing ongoing sexual abuse or caring for sexually abused individuals *outside* of the profession and “as a professional.” The missing data were six in the first case, compared to zero in the latter. The explanation for this could possibly be that the first question might have been apprehended as more personal than the second.

Some differences were also found between the older and younger respondents. Older respondents reported a higher readiness to care for victims psychologically, and this is in agreement with the fact that the older respondents also reported the highest levels of received knowledge about sexual abuse, outside of ministry. The openness to engage in the topic was, however, reported as higher among younger respondents. The respondents as a group reported a high acceptance within the church, regarding engaging and discussing the topic of sexual abuse, but respondents born after 1970 reported the accepting attitude as significantly lower. It is possible that young people have higher demands concerning openness, and that they have a stronger focus on what needs to be done as opposed to the older respondents who tend to focus on what has been done. The younger respondents estimated both their readiness to care for victims and their knowledge about sexual abuse as lower and this can be discussed in terms of insight. It is perhaps easier to admit shortcomings with an opened mind.

Respondents used the opportunity to comment upon their answers and upon the study in general. Some comments indicated that the professional secrecy was perceived as something that restrained participants from reporting knowledge of sexual abuse towards minors to local authorities. In a bishops assembly in 2000 (Biskopsmötet 2000 revised in 2004) the bishops urged that all personnel working in the church “shall” report to local authorities suspicions of abusive acts towards children, especially suspicions of sexual abuse. However, it was also stated that the ministers’ professional secrecy precedes this obligation to report. The responsibility is thereby put on the individual minister to be ready and able to handle such information and to urge the minor to seek help elsewhere.

Limitations

The assumptions of this study were based on methodological agnosticism, which is compatible with diverse metaphysical explanations (Cox 2003). This means that it neither denies nor confirms the independent existence of the religious object. Other perspectives might have led to the formulation of other questions to be studied. A possible problem with the present study is that no social desirability variables were included. Neither was the variable “view of the Bible” included in the questionnaire. Perhaps this would have provided interesting insights on how the ministers’ own religious views might have had impact on reported readiness either to disclose sexual abuse or to care for victims. Due to the sensitive topic under investigation, if replicated, such variables should be included. A follow up study with in-depth interviews might clarify and give a better understanding of what lies behind both statistical significances as well as non-significances, and might provide a deeper insight on the topic.

Finally, the response rate will be commented upon and also the tendency to answer questions concerning sexuality. A response rate of 63% is not low for surveys distributed by mail to a general population (Church 1993). The assumption before the distribution was that as the topic is a sensitive one, this might cause a low response rate. To compensate for this, the accompanying letter pointed to the fact that the study was aiming towards the future, with hopes of identifying potential strengths of Christianity in caring for victims of sexual abuse. Further, there seems to exist a volunteer bias in studies concerning sexual matters (Plaud et al. 1999). Those who are most likely to take part are individuals considered to be more sexually liberal than those who are not willing to participate.

Concluding remarks

A majority of the respondents answered in a way that revealed an ambition to deal with a complex problem in a respectful and knowledge-based way. As a group they asked for more knowledge, better support from the system and they also expressed a wish to collaborate with other professionals. If these ambitions are to be fulfilled, the ministers need to increase their reflection upon, and their knowledge about this topic, both psychologically and theologically. An accepting attitude towards engaging in discussions about sexual abuse needs to be further promoted.

As mentioned earlier, there seems to be an ambiguity in the formulation from the bishop's assembly in 2000 (revised in 2004) concerning professional secrecy and the obligation to report to local authorities. Due to the serious consequences of sexual abuse and the ministers' authoritative position, the professional secrecy and the lack of clear and central directives need to be discussed. Further, cooperation between professions must be encouraged. This cooperation should be built on the competence and expertise of the collaborating professionals, considering themselves as equals in working to benefit for the care of potential victims.

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