

## **Survivor of Clergy Abuse Speaks for Voiceless Victims** Amanda Gearing

The trial in Australia of a former senior Baptist pastor on twenty-one sex and violence charges this year marked a low-point in public confidence for the Baptist Union and, by implication, other churches in Australia rocked by the continuing procession of clerics of various denominations being jailed for sex crimes.

The senior pastor in this case was acquitted of all charges. However, the pastor's admissions of extramarital sex with a vulnerable parishioner have sent shock waves through congregations and the clergy. The former pastor, who is married with children, led a Perth congregation for six years.

The Baptist Churches of Western Australia has a ChurchSafe program designed to stamp out abuse in the church. ChurchSafe warns ministers to behave with integrity because their personal behaviour and relationships are a model to others and therefore have a significant impact on the church and the community. The program also sets out clear standards of conduct for ministers requiring them to display behaviours and attitudes that are above reproach when interacting with others and to be sensitive and respectful towards people with different family and cultural traditions.

For the faithful congregations, shock may turn to anger in this case, however, because the congregation 'forgave' the pastor for a previous adulterous affair he confessed to having with a parishioner in Queensland. The Baptist Union might find it difficult to justify why they allowed a person known to have already violated ministerial standards to be appointed as a church leader.

Professional codes of behaviour in the medical profession, allied health, and churches are designed to protect vulnerable patients, clients, and parishioners. In this case, the parishioner was far more vulnerable than an Australian woman would have been. She was a recent immigrant to Australia from a devout Hindu tradition and had no understanding of Christian teachings. When she arrived at the church with her husband and two toddlers she was heavily pregnant and had no extended family. The power structure of the relationship in this case was far more akin to clerical abuse of a child than an extramarital affair with an adult.

In clergy-child abuse, the abusive relationship is characterised by the grooming of all the protectors of the child, such as the parents and their colleagues, long before the offender begins any abuse of the target victim. Once the child's protectors develop trust in the clergy offender, the offender befriends the targeted child using gifts and attention.

In addition, the cleric is in a position of spiritual authority, recognised by the victim's family and friends as being trustworthy, honest, and faithful to Christian values. The child, once victimised, has no one to turn to in order to report the evil he or she is experiencing. In the Perth case, the same grooming procedure was carried out. The woman was introduced to scripture references on love and forgiveness which trapped her into silence in a maelstrom of shame, fear, and confusion. That the case did reach a trial is due in large part to the woman's resolve to escape the imposed silence she had endured for several years.

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Once she escaped from the relationship in 2006, she graduated from university with a doctorate degree and threw herself into helping victims of child prostitution in developing countries. She has become a regular contributor to forums of the World Council of Churches and various United Nations conferences, receiving several prestigious government awards and commendations at state, national, and global levels for her contributions to multicultural awareness.

Eventually she summoned the courage to report to police, made a statement running more than 250 pages, and waited for a police investigation to be carried out and court processes to unfold. After four years, the trial was finally underway and she was ready to give her evidence. What she did not expect from the trial of the offender was to feel as though she was the one on trial, facing questioning about intimate details of the alleged sexual violence, and for her evidence to be subjected to the public gaze by being reported, and misreported, in the media.

The pastor had his name suppressed throughout the court proceedings. The suppression order was lifted at the beginning of the trial in the Perth District Court after *The West Australian* successfully argued that in the interests of open justice, his name should be released for publication. In an unusual move, the accused's legal counsel asked the court to allow the accused a day before his name was published because he had not yet told his aged father or his work colleagues of the serious charges against him. The court granted the extra time.

Despite the lifting of the suppression order, however, *The West Australian* still did not publish the name of the accused for fear of identifying the complainant in the case. Wanting extra legal protection, the newspaper asked the victim to sign a consent form to protect the newspaper in case she was identified by the details given in court reports. The consent form request coincided with a serious error in day one of the reporting of the case, when the reporter wrongly stated that the prosecution case was that the pastor had begged the woman not to have an abortion when he discovered she was pregnant. Whilst the reporter could be forgiven for assuming the pastor's stance on abortion, it was wrong.

In fact the prosecution case was the exact opposite – that the pastor ordered the woman to have an abortion and threatened to kill himself unless she complied immediately. The woman, who had been deeply traumatised by unwillingly submitting to the abortion, was re-traumatised by having to write an extensive police statement outlining twenty-one sex and violence offences she alleged had been committed against her.

However, this paled into insignificance when compared with her horror at reading the false report published state-wide in the newspaper. The newspaper did not make a correction but tried to undo the damage by getting the story correct in their report of the case the following day. She found the false reporting difficult to endure because there was no avenue for her to protect herself against the incorrect reporting.

She gave her evidence in the court over nine days as she recounted the allegations and was cross-examined on two counts of aggravated burglary, one of assault occasioning bodily harm, eleven alleged rapes and seven indecent assaults. Several times during cross-Mozaik 26, *Stop Being Silent!*, "Survivor of Clergy Abuse Speaks for Voiceless Victims", Amanda Gearing, 2010.

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examination she vomited when appalling propositions were put to her by the defence barrister.

She almost gave up the case. Some mornings she felt unable to get out of bed, she trembled and cried at night recalling the day's brutal cross-examination. Yet she somehow managed to go back to the court day after day. She was determined to speak the truth as best she knew how – and she knew that as she spoke, she was a voice for the many victims of sex crimes who never have the opportunity to speak in court.

The reporter covering the trial was tasked to cover other cases at the same time so he could not be in the court for the whole trial. The coverage did not include the weight of evidence from the accused and defence witnesses which demonstrated the deceptive nature of the accused's relationship with his wife, his church congregation, the complainant, and her family. These deceptions were obvious to people in the courtroom. The reporting belittled and humiliated the complainant.

Some of the failure of the prosecution case was due to inadequate police investigation, which arguably could have left reasonable doubt in the minds of the jury. The second investigating police officer admitted under cross-examination during the trial that he had failed to carry out vital investigations and had failed to gather critical evidence.

*The West Australian* reported: Police detective Anthony Walton admitted under cross-examination that he had never visited the woman's house or sought proof she had an abortion. Once the acquittal was delivered, the complainant felt, understandably, that the time she had spent in the witness box retelling and reliving her ordeal had come to naught. In addition, her unwillingness to sign the consent form meant the pastor was still not identified in the public arena. Once the pastor was acquitted the newspaper decided not to name him, even though by then the complainant had regathered her strength and had signed the consent form.

It appears the pastor has escaped unscathed. He now works as a real estate agent and his website claims that his 'role of Senior Pastor at Baptist Churches around Australia has given him extra insight into human behaviour and the need for communication and trust'.

What is more surprising than the acquittal in this case, is that the case proceeded to a court at all.

Though the complainant is understandably disillusioned with the press and the acquittal, she is not crushed. She has already used her experiences to bring hope to women and children who are survivors of abuse through arts and culture. Her advocacy on behalf of victims will be all the more powerful for her first-hand experience of the justice system. However, her estimation of Australia has been damaged and the family has moved overseas because they no longer feel safe in Australia.

The woman will undoubtedly speak of her experiences in global forums and work for change to protect other vulnerable people. Her husband, an Englishman with a doctoral degree in biomedical engineering, has supported his wife through the protracted prosecution and has seen her endure intolerable humiliation during the court case. He now understands how vulnerable his wife was when she attended a Christian church in a culture foreign to her Asian  
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background, seeking to assimilate herself and her children into the Australian culture. 'My wife simply needed a place where she could pray and befriend Australians safely', he said.

The husband and wife both relied on the congregation as their primary social network. The pastor became the husband's only trusted friend. 'I was blinded by his position of spiritual authority and unable to protect my wife in spite of her numerous attempts to reach out to me', he said. Having seen the suffering his wife endured and his own vulnerability, he is now supporting his wife's efforts to eliminate violence in churches. 'I don't want to see any woman suffer like my wife has suffered'.

*Amanda Gearing is an award-winning journalist who has worked in Australia and the UK. She established and headed the Courier-Mail's Toowoomba bureau from 1997-2007. In 2002, she received one of Queensland's major media awards for 'Best News Report, All Media'. For the past seven years Amanda has supported several victims of sexual crimes by clergy through criminal cases, church tribunals, and civil actions. She has presented papers at major child protection conferences in Sydney and Brisbane and advocates for law reform to improve child protection legislation in Australia. Amanda currently works as a freelance multi-media reporter from her base in Toowoomba and is currently studying law at university.*

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