

Understanding the Mystery of Clergy Sexual Abuse

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At the Stop Being Silent! seminar in Minsk, in an interactive session on 'Redefining Domestic Violence: Sexual Exploitation and the Church', Dr. Valli Batchelor lectured about violence against women by clerical abusers.

This excerpt provides an overview of clergy sexual exploitation and the Hope of Survivors network, following from the previous article on what happened when one woman tried to speak out in Australia. This excerpt has been reprinted and adapted with permission from the Hope of Survivors website (www.thehopeofsurvivors.com), a resource and support organisation for victims of clergy sexual exploitation. Because the majority of clergy sexual abuse is male clerical abuse of female parishioners, this article only addresses this majority.

The Hope of Survivors

Shame is the reason I'm so proud to be connected with The Hope of Survivors. Perhaps I should explain.

More than any organisation I've known in several decades of pastoral ministry, including law enforcement chaplaincy, the Hope of Survivors (THOS) helps victims feeling ashamed from sexual abuse find dignity, confidence, hope, and even joy. And so I'm proud to serve on the executive board of THOS.

Shame afflicts most of us to some degree. It's part of the human condition. As a chubby child, I was ashamed of my weight. Parents might be ashamed of their teenagers' bad choices. Reformed 'party animals' may feel shame for years of carousing. But the human spirit knows no shame to match that of a sexual abuse victim who has been manipulated into feeling guilty for her predator's sins. And those among them most deeply sunken in shame may be victims of clergy sexual abuse.

Reasonable people are outraged at a sexual predator who drags a jogger off the trail into the bushes. Society springs to the defence of such victims. As for incest, everyone except enabling relatives is furious about paternal predators. But when it comes to clergy sexual abuse, congregational sympathy usually gravitates to a popular, powerful preacher. Ironically, victims of clergy sexual abuse often must go outside the church to find a sympathetic heart. Tragically, they may lose not only their trusted spiritual leader but also most, if not all, of their faith community – even close friends.

This is where THOS has been such a lifesaver for hundreds of lonely victims of clergy sexual abuse who suffer in solitary shame. THOS helps them realise that:

- As with all professionals, a pastor is responsible for not abusing his trust by allowing – and often planning – the sexualisation of what began as normal interaction between himself and a vulnerable parishioner.

Mozaik 26, *Stop Being Silent!*, "", 2010.

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- Sexual abuse is not necessarily scary or painful; often unsuspecting victims are drawn into a close friendship with a pastor that unexpectedly becomes romanticised and then sexualised.
- Clergy romance or sex with a parishioner is not an 'affair', because it arises from a power imbalance. Physicians, educators, and workplace supervisors understand this. Somehow it seems harder for many churches to accept this, perhaps because of the hero status of a star pastor.
- Most pastors are men of integrity who never would abuse a member. To preserve this propriety, clergy need education and sometimes counselling to manage their own emotions and attractions as they interact with the vulnerable members of their flock.
- Victims of clergy sexual abuse need and deserve advocates in the church to guide them through a resolution process that emphasises healing rather than vindictiveness.
- Those who survive clergy sexual abuse need not bear the burden of proving to anyone – not even themselves or God – that they are perfect and completely innocent about what happened to them. The Bible says all of us are sinners in need of the grace and forgiveness of God.
- It is possible to forgive one's abuser while also establishing boundaries of protection against further abuse by anyone inside or outside the body of Christ.
- Women who have suffered clergy sexual abuse need to find their primary identity in being God's beloved children; this is more than having merely survived something evil done to them.

Clergy sexual abuse

To summarise the tragedy of clergy sexual abuse:

- It is normal for Christian men and women faithful to their spouses to feel attracted to other people. Unmet emotional needs tend to multiply this chemistry.
- When a pastor finds himself attracted to a parishioner, it is his or her responsibility as a professional caregiver to recognise the danger and use the responsibility of leadership to prevent the relationship from becoming romanticised.
- Some predatory pastors are so corrupt as to be strategically and compulsively abusive, but many fine pastors become sexually abusive simply because they allow their love for God and their spouses to become less important than their ministry to church members.

Mozaik 26, *Stop Being Silent!*, "", 2010.

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- Paradoxically, victims of abuse often take much or most of the blame and shame upon themselves after being drawn into inappropriate sexuality.
- The more likeable and admirable a pastor is, the more a victim of his sexual abuse may suffer shame and guilt. This also is true at the opposite extreme; the more deceptive and manipulative a career predator is, the more likely his victim may suffer increased shame and guilt – the most clever abusers manage to download all blame to the victim.
- Church leaders and other members typically rally around a popular pastor, despite credible evidence that he is guilty of sexual abuse. Often the church would rather blame his victim than lose a beloved spiritual leader.
- In the aftermath of clergy sexual abuse, most efforts to aid recovery are devoted toward the abuser and his spouse rather than to the victim, who often is abandoned or even expelled from the community of believers.

In such cases, the Hope of Survivors often becomes the only hope of surviving clergy sexual abuse.

Suggested reading:

As recommended by Valli Batchelor and Amanda Gearing

D Garland and C Argueta, 'How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens: A qualitative study of first-hand accounts', *Social Work and Christianity*, 2010.

MACSAS: Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors, <www.macsas.org.uk>.

National Organization for Women, 'Call to Criminalize Sexual Exploitation of Women by Clergy', <www.now.org>.

National Organization for Women, 'NOW President Calls for Fundamental Reform to Stop Clergy Sexual Abuse', <http://www.now.org/issues/violence/clergyabuse_statement.html>.

M Porter, *Sex, Power and the Clergy South*, Yarra, Australia, Hardie Grant Books, 2003.

'Silent Majority: Adults Abused by Clergy', <www.adultsabusedbyclergy.org>.

Mozaik 26, *Stop Being Silent!*, "", 2010.

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