



# Questions

*(with no easy answers)*

## **Congregations ask about clergy sexual abuse**

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# Questions Congregations Ask About Clergy Sexual Abuse

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# What worked for healing and what didn't Work?

## Suggestions for a healing process

- **Report the accusation of abuse to a higher denomination-  
al judicatory**—national, local and/or congregational—if this has not  
already been done. Contact your denomination's Sexual Abuse Hotline, if  
available, for direction on process. If church authorities do not seem help-  
ful or if they cite confidentiality to protect the pastor, advocate for trans-  
parency for the health of the congregation and to protect possible future  
victims.
- **Do not work alone on healing.** Find at least one other person you trust  
for support, preferably 2 or 3, who either believe the abuse took place or  
are willing to consider the possibility that it did. If possible, request official  
authorization to be a healing committee. Find an experienced consultant/  
therapist you are comfortable with to work with the victim(s), your healing  
committee, and the congregation.

- **Work to develop trust and openness in your healing group.**  
Consider how taking leadership will impact each of you personally. There will be backlash from the congregation, the community, family members and governing bodies so take good care of yourselves.
- **Accept that division within the congregation is going to occur.**  
Recognize that, in general, people tend to deny, minimize or avoid talking about abuse, especially since any conversations around sex tend to be difficult. Even among members who believe the abuse took place, there will be concern about how this will hurt the faith community as well as about liability and about losing members and funding. Some will blame the victims or question their credibility. Many will press for forgiveness citing the many good things the pastor has done—“The pastor married me... baptized my child... did the memorial service for my parents...”
- **Create a safe place to listen to victims and collaborate with them to shape a healing process.** This serves two purposes: (a) It restores to victims some measure of control over their lives, thus countering the powerlessness felt during the abuse; and (b) It further reduces the extent to which the redress processes themselves may cause further harm through re-victimization. Always keep the victims as a central focus while recognizing that they will primarily be dealing with their own healing and will need you as advocates. Try to provide a contact/advocate for each victim.
- **Plan a congregational meeting** or community workshop where victims, a therapist and/or healing committee members can share their experiences and a judicatory representative can communicate what the denominational process will be. Encourage members to come and just listen to victims even if they doubt that abuse took place.
- **Identify goals and assess what additional healing steps are needed:** (such as: apologies, community workshops, restitution, support groups, retreats, individual and couple/family therapy, organizational and policy changes, etc).

- **Draw up a plan and possible timeline for healing.**
  - a) If a congregation is to know healing and redemption, the congregation will need to confess its failure to protect victims and apologize for this failure.
  - b) It will need to repent by changing its culture and organizational practices.
  - c) Be aware of the needs of secondary victims (spouses, families, close friends, the congregation itself)
  - d) Ask the therapist/consultant for additional training for your healing committee, secondary victims and/or faith community as needed.
  - e) Expand the committee as needed.
  
- **Build on the faith values of the congregation.** Keep returning to the Biblical perspective that God accompanies us in suffering and longs for us to know justice and healing. Try to maintain relationships with members who continue to deny the abuse around the values that you still hold in common as a Christian community. Do not get side-tracked trying to convince members that the abuse occurred. Over time, if you stick with your healing work and continue to expose members to the truth, the culture of the community may gradually shift to acknowledging the abuse. As Sister Helen Prejean says, in her work fighting the death penalty: “Change the consciousness, change the culture.”
  
- **Move ahead step by step in healing. Accept that you will not be able to see the entire path at the beginning.** Healing involves a long term commitment to dealing with issues as they present themselves. Recognize that the healing process will need to extend beyond the judicial process and that more victims may come forward over time. Don’t bring pre-mature closure but be open to finding new directions in what will be a very complex process. Work in stages; take breaks as needed.

## Why didn't we see signs that the abuse was going on?

*When accusations of clergy sexual abuse are first made, a deeply troubling question arises: How could this happen without members seeing that the abuse was going on?*

**L**IKE ALL SEXUAL ABUSE, clergy abuse thrives in the dark corners of community life. It takes place in secret, private meetings between a pastor and a member of the congregation or its children and youth. The grooming of victims for future abuse is a slow, subtle process, deliberately secretive and hidden. An abuser gradually moves deeper and deeper into a potential victim's life using material and emotional rewards. This process of seduction often extends over years as a web of dependency is slowly woven around a victim's life. In fact, the thrill of seduction and secrecy may well be more titillating than the actual sexual act.

If the victim is a minor, at the same time, parents and guardians are likely to be bound into a web of trust so subtle that they fail to realize that they are being lured in. Just as victims are seduced in a long process of seduction, so too a clergy abuser carefully sets the stage so that, over time, members of the congregation become blind to the ways that secrecy and loyalty have created an environment where abuse can flourish. This is referred to as ‘institutional grooming.’

A clergy abuser holds such powerful influence on a congregation’s life that the warning signs often only become visible in retrospect after light has been thrown upon the faith community by outside influences. Then, in retrospect, perhaps a congregation can begin to ask important questions: Is there a cult of personality around the pastor? Is loyalty rewarded with closeness to the pastor? Is the pastor open to criticism and debate on issues of faith and theology or are members who disagree with the pastor labeled as disloyal?

*That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Saviour’s rule, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” [W]e are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise, it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it. - Historic Principles of Church Order 1788*

*Pursuing and telling the truth is an act of faith that God works in human history and through individuals to redeem, restore, and renew broken lives. By honoring the truth, we honor the Spirit who heals hearts that hurt, and brings justice to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.- From Cameron House Report*

## Why is there so much resistance to acknowledging that abuse took place?

*We are all trapped by the limits of our mind. It's not possible to see the world we live in, only minute, shuttered portions of it where the beam of our attention falls... We each live in a pool of lights, and around us lies the darkness of our un-seeing.*

– Nicci Gerrard, *The Last Ocean*

**E**VERY CONGREGATION HAS A STORY it tells itself about who it is as a Christian community; this story energizes its mission and ministry. Often the pastor plays a starring heroic role in a congregation's story. Unfortunately, members often become so loyal to their story that they create a bubble around themselves that prevents them from seeing their congregation as it really is. A pastor who is an abuser can manipulate the role they have been



cast in so that members fail to see the reality of abuse and instead normalize the pastor's behavior.

Then one day, a victim (or their advocate) with the courage to name the reality of the abuse comes forward and says: "Something is very wrong here! The story you have been telling yourselves about who you are as a congregation is not true. Our pastor is a sexual abuser." Innocence is shattered. The very heart of faith feels threatened. The congregation feels its story falling apart.

Nothing shatters and divides a congregation like having allegations of clergy sexual abuse come forth. It is painful and threatening to face the horrific truth that a beloved and respected pastor, a person you have trusted with something as important and fragile as your faith, has been sexually abusive. Blinders either come off or are frozen into place as the congregation's bubble bursts. On hearing these accusations, many members will lash out and call the person who pierced their bubble a "trouble-maker!"—just as Jesus was called a troublemaker for naming God's truth.

When accusations of clergy abuse are first made, even in the face of compelling evidence that abuse has taken place, for many members, it is easier to believe the pastor's version of what has been going on than it is to acknowledge that abuse has been taking place. While the pastor is only asking the congregation to keep their blinders intact and look the other way, by contrast, victims are asking the congregation to question their relationship with a powerful authority who has been central to their faith. Almost inevitably, many members will side with the person who has the most power and authority to keep their blinders intact... that will be the pastor, not the victim.

Members of a congregation are therefore likely to minimize or deny the allegations. Some will blame the victims and question their credibility. Others will press for premature forgiveness as a means of avoidance. Many will cite the good things the pastor has done—"The pastor married me, baptized my child, did the memorial service for my parents." Or "Don't we need to show compassion for the pastor's family?" Even members who believe that the abuse took place are nonetheless fearful that truth-telling will jeopardize membership and funding and will create liability.

Division strikes deep into the heart of the faith community as congregations split into those who believe the victims and those who side with the pastor. Having been taught as Christians to be trusting and unquestioning, compassionate and forgiving, church members often confuse Jesus' call to be loving with "being nice" by avoiding confrontation and conflict. Rather than seeing anger as an appropriate, even a healing response to abuse, the pain and anger of victims makes members uncomfortable. There is fear that a victim's anger might be re-directed at members of the congregation for failing to see what was going on and stopping the abuse. Members invariably want the anger (and the victim) to just go away.

Division within the congregation is likely to be unavoidable. Though it feels horrible, division is actually a sign that justice has burst through the bubble the congregation has been living in. In reality, the congregation was already a broken community. Members were just blind to their brokenness. The split is painful and filled with anger but, what really matters, is how the congregation responds to the division.

Though truth-telling and confession of sins are unlikely to come from the abuser, they are absolutely essential for the healing of the congregation. There will never be true peace and reconciliation if conflict and division are pushed aside to keep everything 'nice.' There can be no redemption or hope of transformation for those who insist that nothing is broken.

In her book of essays, *Call Them by Their True Names*, Rebecca Solnit says: "Naming is the first step in the process of liberation... I think of the act of naming as diagnosis. Though not all diagnosed diseases are curable, once you know what you are facing, you are far better equipped to know what you can do about it." The faith community must name the unthinkable and proclaim the unspeakable—that sexual abuse by someone known and trusted, by a representative of God, can and does occur.

*The presence of God's fire on the earth is cause for fear and trembling, but perhaps also for celebration. Redemption can only come when the systems of meaning we have made for ourselves are shattered and consumed by fire. Things have to be broken open so God can move into our lives and breathe new life into our community. - Elizabeth Palmer*

## How are clergy abusers able to split congregations?

**M**OST SEXUAL PREDATORS are known for having charming, persuasive, and charismatic personalities. These traits allow them to not only manipulate and seduce their victims, but to dissuade other adults from taking any allegations seriously. Adept at denial and minimization, perpetrators tell very convincing stories: “They were only being loving... The victim asked for it... It was consensual... Their actions are a form of agape love... I was misunderstood.” They use similar rationalizations in the stories they tell to themselves to justify their abusive actions. In contrast to these very believable stories of an adept liar, victims have usually been convinced that their own stories, if told, would be unbelievable.

Acutely sensitive to how others perceive them, abusers are able to tailor their stories to each listener. As a result, many confusing and contradictory versions of events will circulate in the community to manipulate public opinion.

That is why so often, long after they have renounced church jurisdiction, pastor offenders are still able to foment division and manipulate public opinion with their skewed version of events.

This was the case at Cameron House and the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown. (*See Cameron House Full Report*). After the allegations against him had been validated and jurisdiction renounced, the abuser maintained close relationships with many church members and continued to persuasively proclaim his innocence. Many still called him “Dad” or “Granpa Dick.”

Twenty years after his renunciation, the Presbytery Executive and the victims’ therapist visited the abusing pastor to see if he would take any responsibility for his actions. Though highly trained, these two professionals found the experience to be an extremely disorienting example of the stories abusers tell themselves. In one sentence, this former pastor would deny doing anything wrong and, then in the next, describe interactions appalling for their inappropriate nature:

- “The Chinese are very sexually repressed... Chinese men aren’t able to show their affection... I would give them things they couldn’t get at home... ”
- “I’m a hugger. If I’m pressing against someone and they get aroused that happens sometimes...”
- “I was ‘intimate’ with him so he would confide his problems in me.”
- “It’s not sex unless there is ejaculation. . . .”

## How are victims chosen, groomed and intimidated into silence? Why didn't the victim(s) come forward sooner?

**I**T TAKES GREAT COURAGE for victims of sexual misconduct to come forward. To name oneself as a victim goes against every value Western culture attributes to being a successful person filled with assertiveness and self-confidence. Because no one wants to be considered a victim, victims can initially be in denial. Victims are often overcome with shame and see themselves as failing to prevent the abuse.

Victims may blame themselves for what happened... for not saying 'no'... for not fighting off the abuser. They may blame themselves for responding sexually or for needing attention and love from their pastor. Often victims tell themselves things like: "He really loves me;" "I must have asked for it;" "There is something wrong with me that I didn't resist;" "I'm the only one with this special relationship." Even when victims know rationally they did

nothing to cause the abuse, guilt and shame, low self-esteem and lack of confidence, are likely to remain.

Because of the power imbalance between clergy and members, coming forward takes an act of extreme courage. The clergy offender is in a respected position of authority with the power to discredit victims from the pulpit, in congregational life, and among colleagues in the presbytery. Victims are right to fear that their pastor has the ability to discredit not only their experience of abuse, but who they are as Christians and as individuals. Pastors who are abusing power may hint, or even openly claim, that God is on their side. Because of the powerful authority a pastor holds, victim advocates must work hard to create a safe environment where victims can trust that they will be believed. This kind of trust cannot be built overnight.

Even though sexual abuse has been on the front pages of social media, there is still much misunderstanding as to what constitutes sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is so far outside the experience of most people that it is almost impossible to imagine. From an early age, religious people are taught to avoid sexual images, especially images of “dirty” sex. This prohibition on sexual imagery is magnified by the church’s hesitance to talk about sexuality or about any connection between sex and religion. Given these prohibitions, it is difficult for victims of sexual abuse to come forward to speak of their experiences. They lack a language to describe what has happened to them.

There are many “victim” categories and personal experiences vary widely. Sexual abuse may be overt or covert. Overt sexual abuse involves activities like open mouth kissing, fondling, masturbation, intercourse, oral or anal sex. Covert sexual abuse can occur even when there is no physical contact, such as in the use of sexually suggestive language. It can include activities such as voyeurism, exhibitionism, exposing a child to pornography, or having the child act as a surrogate spouse. It is important, even though it is disturbing, to use clear, graphic sexual language to accurately document abuse. This allows others who are victims to know that their experiences are shared.

The Cameron House Healing Task Force began to hear victims speak or write of their experiences. Some—who for years had believed they were successful in fending off their pastor—began to recover memories of molesta-

tion. Others knew they were molested but had minimized the influence these molestations had on their lives only to later discover a profound impact on their self-esteem and intimate relationships. Still others continued to believe that oral sex or genital fondling did not count as sexual abuse. Or victims believed their own relationship with the pastor was so unique and special that it did not constitute “abuse” because they desired the close relationship.

Why can't victims be Christian and forgive?  
Why don't they put the abuse behind them  
and move on with their lives?

*“If you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it.”*

– Zora Neale Hurston

“**W**HY CAN'T YOU JUST FORGIVE and move on with your life?” “Isn't that the Christian thing to do?” “What about 70 times 7?” Fearful that truth-telling might jeopardize membership and funding, the church is prone to denying sexual misconduct or to minimizing its reality with platitudes like “Why can't we all be Christian and just forgive?”



The need for all to be forgiven says more about the needs of non-victims than the needs of victims. As Bonhoeffer pointed out, forgiveness can be a form of cheap grace offered too quickly and easily to avoid the hard work necessary for healing. Anxious to put an unsavory period of congregational life behind them and move on, members do not want their fond memories of the past sullied. Nor do they want to feel guilty because they failed to see that the abuse was taking place. Indeed the question “Why can’t you just forgive?” often hides anger at the victims for disturbing the peaceful surface of the congregation. What is usually meant is not “Why can’t you forgive?” but “Why aren’t we allowed to forget?”

While questions about forgiving are inevitably asked of victims, it is often actually forgiveness for the accused clergy person that is being sought. Forgiveness however does not condone abusive behavior nor does it release an abuser from dealing with the consequences of their behavior. Biblically it is the sinner who is forgiven, never their behavior. There can be no forgiving an abuser without painful truth-telling. Certainly Jesus never asked us to forgive if it means forgetting injustice. While Jesus was always willing to forgive the repentant sinner, he always challenged sinful behavior saying, “Go and sin no more!” He was angry at injustice and continues to challenge us to work unstintingly for justice.

When told that it is their Christian duty to forgive, victims can feel re-victimized and condemned as somehow less-than-Christian. They experience friends and family as having failed to understand the full extent of their pain and trauma. Or they believe that those who want forgiveness just want to cover up the reality of the abuse and move on. Before victims can even begin to consider forgiving, they must have a sense of truly having been heard, a sense that others care about seeking justice.

Victims often long to be able to forgive and put the past behind them. However they first need to free themselves from a cycle of punishment that, in all likelihood, often has been, consciously, or unconsciously, directed inward. When victims are asked to focus on forgiving their abuser rather than focusing on their own healing process, healing is impeded. Forgiving self, forgiving God, forgiving community, are all more important to healing than forgiving an abuser.

Each survivor has their own timetable and way of working through to healing. Some cope by putting the abuse behind them as soon as possible and “getting on with life”. Some put it behind them for a period of time only to find that, later in life, the trauma re-surfaces. Healing is not a continuous process. Healing and trauma, thriving and just surviving, are likely to come and go in waves throughout a person’s life. Indeed it may be important to take breaks in the healing process before moving on to the next phase of healing.

Even when a person appears to have left the experience of being a victim behind forever, life events can unexpectedly re-trigger the trauma. At any time, PTSD from the abuse may re-occur, triggered unexpectedly by life events. Then, once again, with the on-going support of the community, healing can move forward into deeper and deeper levels.

Working through the wounds of abuse usually involves a lifetime journey toward wholeness. Forgiveness, if it comes at all, is likely to be the very last step in a long journey of healing. Ultimately, forgiveness is not ours to command. It is a gift of grace, not a matter of willpower or of choice. It takes place in God’s time, not human time.

“Yes, Christianity insists on forgiveness. But it calls us first to mourn, to lament, to burn with zeal, and to hunger and thirst for justice. Forgiveness in the Christian tradition isn’t a palliative; it works hand-in-hand with the arduous work of repentance and transformation. In other words, there is nothing godly about responding to systemic evil with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity.” –

Rev. Debie Thomas

“Forgiveness is a process — a messy, non-linear, and often barbed process that can leave us feeling healed up and free one minute, and bleeding out of every pore the next... Forgiveness isn’t an escalator; it’s a spiral staircase. We circle, circle, and circle again, trying to create distance between the pain we’ve suffered and the new life we seek. Sometimes we can’t tell if we’ve ascended at all; we keep seeing the same, broken landscape below us. But slowly, slowly, slowly, our perspective changes. Slowly, slowly, slowly, the ground of our pain falls away. Slowly, slowly, slowly, we rise. – Rev. Debie Thomas

## Why don't "If I have hurt anyone..." apologies help?

**F**AILURE TO ACKNOWLEDGE RESPONSIBILITY, whether by the abuser or by the church, sends a message to survivors that they are not believed, and that their experiences are not publicly and officially accepted as true. Without an apology, survivors are forced to bear the full burden of proving that they were harmed. An apology that is specific in stating that the treatment victims endured constituted abuse, and that they were in no way to blame for this, can be a significant event for survivors on the path to healing. The power of public apology then lies in its potential to restore victims to a sense of their human worth and dignity.

When an abuser continues to deny the reality of the abuse, or minimizes its impact, that person maintains power over victims who have already experienced being powerless during the abuse. True repentance requires that an abuser let go of their position of power if that person is to be open to receiving

forgiveness. Is the former clergy person willing to confess to the sins of abuse? Has that person named and apologized for the explicit wrongs named in the allegations or have they simply said that they are sorry “if” harm was caused? If victims are asked to forgive a non-repentant abuser that only reinforces, yet again, the power the abuser has over them.

“If I hurt someone, I’m sorry” is not an apology. It is insufficient to apologize to people for their pain without explicitly acknowledging the wrongs named in the allegations. Anything less than a full, explicit apology is, as Bonhoeffer said, “cheap grace.” A sincere apology therefore must be absolute and unqualified. It must express a commitment to reform in the future. It needs to be offered voluntarily.

Realistically, a sincere and explicit apology from a perpetrator is unlikely to occur given that denial was central to the abuse in the first place. In all likelihood, that denial still remains. Congregations and higher church judicatories can and must however be explicit in naming the harm that was caused and apologize for their role in failing to act to prevent the abuse from occurring. Even if survivors have been able to reach a place of forgiveness as part of their own healing, it is usually essential to completely sever ties with an unrepentant offender.

Who are secondary victims and what kind of support do they need? When my partner is a victim how will sexual abuse affect my marriage and family?

**P**ERHAPS BECAUSE OF ITS ROOTS in the interdependent Chinese culture, Cameron House soon recognized that clergy sexual misconduct does not just impact individual victims, it sends out ripple effects on spouses and children, families and marriages, congregations and local communities. The families of victims—their partners, children and parents, close relatives and friends—can all be secondary victims of sexual abuse. Thus compassionate justice for victims involves more than support for primary victims and calling an offender to account. It requires the support and healing of secondary victims as well.

Sexual abuse has its deepest impact on the most intimate relationships of a victim. Sexual abuse destroys a person's sense of safety and security which

forms the essential foundation needed for well-being and dealing with the world effectively. When people feel safe, they approach the world with a confidence that allows them to risk moving beyond the familiar. When people feel unsafe, however, they live with fears that may lead to withdrawal or engaging in reckless behavior. Thus clergy sexual violation is likely to create enduring suspicion of emotional closeness, including words of love and expressions of physical and sexual affection.

When clergy abuse is first brought into the light, secondary victims—particularly the spouses and partners of victims—take on a painful burden. They become the hidden healers who, with little support, daily work behind the scenes to heal their loved ones. They do this while, at the same time, trying to make sense of and cope with their own shocked feelings of discovering that their partners have been victims.

At Cameron House, when some of the relationships began, the secondary victims were not aware that they had fallen in love with someone who had been abused. Indeed, until the reality of the abuse was openly named, the victims themselves may not have known that what they experienced was sexual abuse. Victims often find it difficult to talk about what is happening to them at the same time that they are dealing with their own healing. As a result, secondary victims can feel abandoned in the very relationships they are seeking to heal and at a time when they too need support.

With the focus of necessity on the healing of victims, the needs of secondary victims are often overlooked. At the same time, spouses are no longer able to turn to their partners for support for victims are focused on their own healing. Here is how one partner of a victim describes the impact of sexual abuse on a marriage:

*For much of my married life, I coped with the effects of clergy abuse on my own life and the life of my family without knowing that was what was going on. My childrearing years, in particular, were impacted by my husband's almost-successful attempt at suicide and the following years of mood swings and bursts of rage. Unaware that my husband had been a victim of clergy sexual abuse, my married life in those years was filled with confusion, shame and a sense of guilt that I was the source of reactions I could not understand.*

*When a child or adolescent is abused, their emotional responses are, in many ways, paralyzed at that period of time when the abuse occurred. When a stressful event occurs in present time, my husband will often go back again in time to the emotional resources he had as a 13 year-old whose father died when he was seven and who was later betrayed by his all-important father figure and pastor. My husband goes into a tail spin, overwhelmed by his emotions and, not knowing where they come from, he feels completely unable to cope.*

*I don't really have words to describe what these episodes are like. Overwhelmed, I would lose my own sense of self, often blaming myself for doing something to trigger the episode. Emotionally, I am completely drained. For me, it is like living in the middle of an emotional tornado where you are fighting constantly not to be sucked into the center. Or like wading chest deep through quick sand. I have yet to learn how to protect myself effectively in these situations. The best I can do is to try to keep my feet on the ground but I am far from grounded.*

For far too long, the pain and struggles of the partners of the Cameron House victims remained hidden and unvoiced. Once the Healing Task Force recognized their needs, a support group for the wives and partners of victims was created. In the safe and sacred space of a professionally led support group, women were able to process their fears and confusion, anger and grief, loneliness and vulnerability, helplessness and exhaustion. Here, they were not alone.

*This group offered fellowship and nurturing at a time when I felt alone. I was astonished to discover there were others with similar experiences. The realization that our lives have followed parallel paths has been truly healing and inspiring. Being able to speak what felt unspeakable, to be heard and validated by others, and to listen and offer support is a gift and a blessing. The healing will be ongoing and I'm honored to be a part of this engaging and important process. - secondary victim*

*Our healing has included finding that our process is as important as the survivors'—different, but not less. - secondary victim*

*From the very first time that I came to this group, I have felt it to be a sacred, safe space to process my fears, helplessness, confusion, loneliness, exhaustion, vulnerability, frustration, anger, grief and sense of self as a secondary victim where there was a gross abuse of power within a trusted and respected institution. - secondary victim*

*Over the years, the group has been critical in helping me to find my internal voice... at times, just for my own positive self-talk and at other times, using it externally to stand up for what I need. - secondary victim*

*This group has been an anchor in understanding the sexual abuse my spouse experienced, and the impact on me and our children. In a sense, it has to demystify and reaffirm the love that drew me to my partner, and allowed me to once again love the Chinatown community and culture that I felt betrayed my husband, and actually transcends as a blessing beyond the abuse he experienced. - secondary victim*



## How is clergy sexual abuse an abuse of power?

*If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? – Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago, Part I*

**S**EXUAL ABUSE is always more about an abuse of power than it is about sex. That is why vulnerable populations—women, children and youth, developmentally disabled adults, immigrant night shift workers, for instance—are frequent targets of sexual misconduct. It is also why Jesus’ anger was directed at people in positions of power who not only failed to protect God’s most vulnerable, but who used their power to abuse them. Indeed, Jesus insisted that people remove the blinders that had been keeping them comfortable and look at how power and privilege were influencing their lives. A willingness to confront power is however seldom extolled as a Christian attribute. Healing work must be willing to look at issues of power behind an abuse and change the power dynamics in the congregation that allowed the abuse to occur in the first place.

Clergy sexual abuse is primarily an abuse of personal power for purposes of sexual gratification. Yet many people find the idea that clergy even have power to be an anathema. Clergy sexual misconduct is particularly difficult to acknowledge because it challenges the protected status of ministers as representatives of God. Christians—particularly pastors—are supposed to be humble servants of the Lord. There is a failure to recognize that the concept of servanthood can be manipulated by an abuser to hide covert power.

Though, in the past, white male clergy held positions of considerable power and authority in American communities, in today's society, clergy power within the broader society has declined significantly. Nonetheless, within congregations, presbyteries and denominations, clergy still wield an immense power, particularly over laity. Indeed the title 'pastor' refers to 'shepherd' in the Biblical story of the good shepherd, a story often treated as an allegory. In this interpretation, parishioners are taught to see themselves as sheep called to obediently follow their pastor shepherd.

Rarely is the issue of clergy power discussed in our seminaries where pastors are trained. Until there is a significant shift in how clergy and laity understand the use of power within congregations, the abuse of power by clergy will continue.

## Why does the church sometimes seem more interested in protecting itself than in seeking justice for victims?

**A**LL SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS employ power in one way or another, sometimes for good, sometimes not. Institutions are very protective of their power and guard against anything or anyone who might threaten their stability. If Jesus was to help people, he found that he not only needed to exorcise individuals, he also needed to exorcise the institutional abuse that created the diseases he was seeking to heal.

Like all institutions, churches are self-protective. When the tragedy of clergy abuse exposes the church as broken, too often a church's priority is to preserve its reputation. Members fear that the church's ability to carry out God's mission in the world will be compromised if it publicly confesses its sins.

With its theology of repentance, one might think the church would be better at acknowledging the pervasiveness of sin and the corrupting effects of power than other institutions. However, because the church sees itself as doing the work of the Lord, it considers itself “exceptional” to other institutions in the abuse of power. It prefers to think of itself as outside of institutional structures and untainted by the possibility of worldly corruption. As a consequence, the church is, if anything, even more uncomfortable acknowledging that ‘godly’ power can be used for evil than it is in talking about sexual matters.

Because the use of power for both good and evil purposes is often almost inextricably mixed within an institution, the many good things an institution is doing are often used as an excuse to look the other way. Ironically, these are the same excuses that clergy abusers and their supports often use to justify their abuse.

*Confronting sin so that all can live in truth and hope isn't an impediment to the gospel; it's the work of the church.* - Christian Century 9/2018

How does clergy abuse impact faith? How can we trust a God who does not protect us from this kind of evil?

**M**OLESTATION BY A PASTOR not only has physical, social and emotional consequences, it has spiritual consequences as well. In acting as a representative of God who used Christian faith for evil, a clergy abuser strikes at the heart of a victim's ability to trust their faith, their faith community, and, ultimately, God. Deep ambivalence and anger towards a God who could allow the abuse to happen is the inevitable result. The likelihood that victims will become alienated from their faith community, particularly when members defend the accused pastor, is very real. Some victims will completely reject the church; others will struggle with trusting future pastors.

Though there is a tendency to view clergy sexual abuse as a personal matter between an abused individual and God, clergy abuse impacts not just victims,

but the whole congregation. When unquestioning faith in a pastor turns out to have been misplaced, the very heart of faith feels threatened. When faith is betrayed, everyone in the faith community is, in some way, victimized. Like victims of abuse who cannot help but question whether God was a force behind the harm, many members will also experience a crisis of faith. Theology that has been taken for granted—concepts of love, grace, forgiveness, evil, and justice—must be rethought in light of the reality that pastors can misuse their power.

How can someone who may have done many good things also abuse their power? How is it possible to trust a God who does not protect us from evil? How can God be trusted if God's representative on earth cannot be trusted? Allowing these deep theological questions to surface is extremely painful. Yet a key to healing a congregation from clergy abuse lies in a congregation's willingness to name and struggle with these important faith questions even though they lack ready answers.

Over time, as healing work progresses, church members, and even some survivors, may experience a shift in their relationship with God. They may find a faith that is no longer focused around the traditional God of power and might. Instead faith centers more deeply on the way God took human form in Jesus Christ and suffered at the hands of evil. God is seen as one who lovingly walks alongside us and who weeps for us in our pain. At the same time, God longs for us to know that suffering does not have the last word and that healing love continues to come to us through the grace of God.

## What role do gender, race and culture play in the clergy sexual abuse?

**R**ACE AND CULTURE, language and religion, gender and social status are all tools a perpetrator can use to enhance their power to abuse and increase the vulnerability of their victims. All were used by the Cameron House abuser who took advantage of the cultural issues that made the Chinatown community uniquely vulnerable to abuse. The Chinese immigrant community, for instance, was not comfortable speaking about feelings or publicly exposing private “family” matters. Youth were taught to respect their elders and to not question authority.

Up into the 70s, when a third generation of ABCs (American Born Chinese) began to arise, youth coming to the program came largely from the homes of non-English speaking immigrants. For these youth, English was a second language though they attended schools where speaking Chinese was prohibited. Anxious for their children to be successful in the American culture, parents

encouraged their children to do well at school. They assumed that their children would maintain their Chinese heritage and simply add American skills to that heritage.

For similar reasons, Chinatown parents allowed their children to attend the Cameron House program. When Chinese youth entered the doors of Cameron House, however, they entered a world where their Chinese cultural heritage and language would have no place. The pastor's birthday was an occasion of great celebration known as National Chocolate Sunday. Yet there was no celebration of Chinese New Year even as the community outside the doors resounded with the pops of firecrackers and loud Chinese lion dances. Instead American New Year's Eve was celebrated with a Watch Night service. Encouraged by their parents to become "successful" Americans, youth did not question a program built around the pastor's own Germanic traditions and songs while discouraging expressions of Chinese culture and language.

Over time, parents became concerned that the Cameron House program, not only took away from family time, but that their children were losing their cultural heritage. They became anxious as their children began mixing English into their Chinese conversations in the home. In fact, many children did eventually lose the ability to converse in Chinese with their parents.

When it came to gender, male gender was defining for the youth program and only males were allowed to rise into positions of leadership. While the Cameron House program was for both boys and girls, a separate girls' worker held a position of lower status. At summer camp, girls were sent off on evening hikes while boys went for nude swims where water play made them easy prey to sexual advances. Perhaps most confusing of all, to boys who had no experience of American sexual mores, the pastor encouraged his victims to believe that his advances were simply the 'Caucasian' way of relating.

Already aware that Western culture was highly sexualized compared to Chinese culture, how were youth to know where Americans drew their sexual boundaries? As far as they knew, hugs that led to arousal were just the American way of expressing affection. Participants who were critical of the program in any way were labeled disloyal and were soon marginalized to the edges of the program to eventually be pushed out altogether.



Couples who wanted to marry assumed they needed the pastor's blessing to do so. In fact, the pastor matched many of the couples himself. If a couple had been dating for a number of years without announcing their engagement, the pastor would bring scissors to the annual "family formal" and cut the tie of the male as a sign that it was time for the couple to become engaged. When marriage took place in the sanctuary, if the bride was not approved of by the pastor because she was not involved in the program, the marriage vows took place at the bottom of the chancel steps rather than up on the chancel.

Christianity was presented as an American religion. Most Chinese customs, particularly its funeral practices, were discredited as pagan. Theological interpretations were used to underscore the superiority of Western religion and culture. During the time of Ms. Cameron, the girls she rescued from slavery worshiped regularly and had close connections with the Chinese Presbyterian Church, the oldest Chinese Protestant congregation in America. The Cameron House director/pastor added an English-speaking congregation of youth and was gradually able to shift power on the Session away from the Chinese-speaking congregation.

Eventually, Session meetings were conducted completely in English. Roberts Rules of Order & the Presbyterian Book of Order, which were unfamiliar to the Chinese-speaking congregants, were used to manipulate meetings so that decisions favored the English-speaking pastor. Chinese-speaking pastors were forced to leave the congregation on the grounds that they were not adequately Presbyterian. In a play for power to de-emphasize the congregation's Chinese identity, the name of the church was changed from the Chinese Presbyterian Church to the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown.

## Will we ever be able to put these wounds behind us?

*The place of the wound is the place of the healing. The place of the break is the place of the greatest strength. That's why Jesus himself, even in his resurrected body, reappears with the wounds still in his hands, in his side, in his feet. - Richard Rohr, Breathing Under Water*

*A Christian community is a healing community not because wounds and pains are alleviated but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision. ... The wound which causes us to suffer now, will be revealed to us later as the place where God intimated his new creation. - Henri Nouwen, The Wounded Healer*

**W**HEN A PASTOR ABUSES, it is possible to walk through to the other side and recover a renewed faith and a restored community. But to do so requires repentance and that cannot take place without painful truth-telling and confession of sins. While these acts may be unlikely to come from the clergy abuser, they are essential to the healing

of a congregation. Recognition that something has gone deeply wrong within the faith community is the first step toward setting things right again.

Barbara Brown Taylor notes that, for Christians, repentance and confession of sins are signs of hope. There can be no hope of repair or transformation for those who insist that nothing is broken. To heal the breach that severs trust, a community must be willing to name the unthinkable and proclaim the unspeakable—that sexual abuse by someone known and trusted, by a representative of God, can and does occur.

When Jesus suffered and was wounded, he proclaimed “This is my body broken for you....” The church as body must acknowledge that it too has been broken. This requires great courage and stamina. When the wounds of abuse are seen in the light of Jesus’ willingness to suffer brokenness, wounds may even become a source of strength. The actual wound is not forgotten but its power to entrap a victim or a congregation in the past in a continual replay of anger and bitterness can be broken. The scars are still there and will not go away but the victims and the community can move on in life to become survivors, even thrivers, activists, and healers.

Fifteen years after its pastor/director demitted, Cameron House and the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown recognized that the abuse had not just impacted individuals, it had sent out ripple effects on spouses and children, families and marriages, indeed the whole congregation. The abuse no one dared to speak about sat like a proverbial elephant in the middle of the faith community. The same culture of secrecy that had for years allowed the abuse to continue still said that this is something not to be spoken about.

With rumor, innuendo, and speculation continuing to divide this Chinese American Christian community, the faith community would need to acknowledge that it too had played a role in allowing the abuse to occur. Cameron House would need to risk losing its life as an institution in order to save the lives of victims and repair its life together as a community. Many thought Cameron House was crazy to undertake a process of truth-telling and healing. Cameron House would lose funds. It would lose membership. It would open itself to liability claims. It would lose its cherished traditions. Its name and mission would be forever tarnished. The larger church’s difficulty in

dealing with its own potential for evil—along with its inability to acknowledge that clergy are capable of abusing their power—would only make the healing journey that much more difficult.

Nonetheless, Cameron House intentionally and courageously stepped forward into truth-telling. Determined to change the institutional culture that had allowed the abuse to take place, it began to name its wounds and bring them into the light of day. While the culture of secrecy that pervaded the community had, for years, allowed the abuse to continue, once acknowledged, it was the strength of the community's commitment to shared values and to seeking justice that ultimately gave Cameron House the courage to risk its life and step forward into truth-telling. Cameron House would become a force for healing and a model for deep institutional change.

In the initial stages of healing, giving voice to victims was the primary priority. As a series of healing workshops brought the abuse out into the open, more victims began to trust the work of the Healing Committee and come forward. In the initial stages, hearing from those who had positive experiences in the Cameron House program would have been inappropriate given the disproportionate experience of harm done to victims. After many years of honest conversation and truth-telling, however, the community was able to acknowledge that a diversity of experiences within its community had always been present in the program. Some program participants had only positive experiences with the pastor. Many felt that the program had contributed greatly to their personal and vocational growth.

Having dared to name the evil within the program, the community was now able to claim both the good and the bad, the light and the dark of the Cameron House story. Once a full diversity of experiences could be acknowledged, life together as a faith community was enriched by its greater complexity. The breach within the community began to heal as an even stronger community was built upon the powerful experience of truth-telling and healing. The faith community could now re-visit the story it had told itself about its past identity. It was possible to gain a new understanding of its ministry. As Dr. Satsuki Ina, a therapist who walked with the community into its healing, expressed it: “Survivors challenge us to reconnect fragments and reconstruct history, to make meaning of where we are today in light of

past events.” Slowly, Cameron House began to re-weave its story and grow a renewed identity based on its powerful experience of brokenness healed and justice redeemed.

The faith community could now celebrate the many ways God’s grace has been present throughout the program’s history. In addition to being a youth and social service program, God has worked, and continues to work, through the Cameron House legacy to bring light into dark places. In its early years during the late 1800s, its ministry took the form of daring adventure when Miss Cameron jumped between Chinatown rooftops and traversed dark alleyways to rescue trafficked slave girls. In the community’s more recent history, God has been working through a program to heal victims of domestic violence and bring justice immigrants excluded by unjust laws. Most recently, God has been present in our healing work with victims of the clergy sexual abuse. More than seventeen years later that healing work is still ongoing, shifting into new forms to meet current needs. Cameron House now claims a renewed Christian identity as a community of “Wounded Healers.”

*“In facing our own darkness, we prevent darkness or evil from having the final say and defining us as victims. What has been hidden and unspoken for so many years can now be openly discussed. In naming the unspeakable act of sexual abuse, we as victims and as a community have begun to heal and are being transformed.”* - Doreen Der-McLeod, former Director of Cameron House