

Author, Mary DeMuth says, “An untold story never heals.” As I thought on this it occurred to me that it is *stories* that change hearts, not statistics.

So, let me tell you a story.

I was still numb from that morning’s events. My campus pastor, who was also my boss and my counselor had finally taken what he wanted.

I had been confused for weeks but the fog seemed heavier as I tried to explain, in intimate detail, what led to that morning—to the four men sitting in my lead pastor’s office.

My timeline was a mess. I kept going back and forth. I explained how I constantly said, “no”, how I cried while being backed up against the wall, how I told him I couldn’t breathe.

All, while also taking ownership; I wasn’t strong enough, I let this happen. It had to be my fault! My pastor said we were in this together, he said I was a tease, and I was in control.

Even while relaying the horrible things he had said to me, I tried to protect him.

The pastors heard what I said, told me not to speak to anyone who was affiliated with the church, and then sent my husband and I away.

The next day, via phone, they demanded my resignation and again my silence—claiming it was for my protection. They also told me I wasn’t welcome on any campus or event for 6 weeks.

A church wide email was sent out praising my abuser, whom had been allowed to resign. They talked of his great works for God’s Kingdom, his love of Christ, and how deeply he would be missed as he was now moving on.

I was lost; my entire life was wrapped up in the church and I wasn’t allowed to speak to anyone.

I lost 20% of my body weight, half of my hair, and all ability to function as a wife or mother.

In time, I was made aware that what had occurred was actually abuse. Asking for another meeting, Peter and I specifically requested the lead pastor be present but, he refused, saying it was too hard for him emotionally and he had more important things to do.

In that meeting, I explained predators and grooming and was met with defense and further accusations.

The following day the Lead Pastor called when I told him I was going to the police. He spent 40 minutes telling me it was not my responsibility to call out another man’s sin and how I had to deal with my own plank.

While I was filing a police report, the church was hiring an employment lawyer. *Only*, they told me, that she was an investigator so that I would cooperate. Which I did. FL law doesn’t protect adults against psychological abuse or manipulation, nor does it protect victims whose trauma response is to appease (or fawn) instead of fight. *Still*, my detective went to the church to tell leadership how this man targeted and abused me, but they didn’t care because “no laws were broken.”

Because I had been silenced, my abuser and leadership were able to create a narrative that best worked for them while turning me into the enemy. I was hated, vilified, rejected, even threatened.

I prayed for death daily and each morning started with tears when I realized God still hadn’t let me die. I was afraid to leave my house, in fear of who I’d run into. The rumors I had heard about myself made me physically ill and I cried nonstop for months.

Desperate, Peter and I shared a tiny bit with friends from the church, and immediately leadership called a meeting. I didn’t want to go, but we thought maybe this will be when they get it right, maybe this will be the time they choose light over darkness.

Instead, they patronized me by telling me how wrong my abuser was for taking advantage of me and using his power to do it.

Immediately followed by telling us that we hurt people when we told them what happened and that we were living in sin by gossiping.

They again demanded my silence, but this time told me if I couldn’t commit, we were not welcome to participate in their fellowship. They said a lot of words, but all I could hear was “We don’t want you.”

They also demanded a letter from my trauma-counselor stating that I was healed enough to be in an environment where I wouldn't be triggered into talking about the abuse. "*Healed Enough!*"

This was not even 4 months post abuse, and they wanted me to be *Healed Enough*. Guys, let me tell you, it's been 28 months since my abuse and I have made *amazing* progress in my healing, but I will never be *healed enough* until I find myself in the arms of Jesus!!

I have never felt so discarded, so worthless, or so insignificant. If the church, who represented God, didn't want me, how could I expect God to feel any different? My faith shattered; the only thing that had always been present for my entire life was broken. God no longer loved me.

I was not the lost sheep the Shepherd went after; I was the damaged sheep that was cast out because my bleeding wounds were staining their carpet and I wasn't worth the clean-up.

So, now you know how not to respond. I have four steps to offer to help you safeguard and respond better

### **First:** Create a safe church

Provide an environment that welcomes concerns and abuse to be reported. All pastors and staff should be trauma informed.

The more aware and informed your leaders are the less likely that red flags will go unnoticed or excused.

Invite survivors to have a voice. Give them space to share with your staff or to give their perspectives in sermon prep meetings.

They are experts in their experience, and they can tell you exactly what makes them feel safe or rejected.

Then, educate your congregation. I guarantee, when you start implanting trauma informed speech into your sermons congregants will approach you with their own stories of abuse.

For some, it will be the first time they ever share. Imagine the honor of being able to lift someone's deepest hurts because you made them feel safe for the first time.

### **Second:** Respond well upon disclosure

My friend, Dr. David Pooler says, when abuse happens the church has the decision to either respond in courage or in fear.

The more you respond with courage the less a victim is further harmed.

The more you respond with betrayal, or fear, the harder for a victim to trust in the future and the more likely they will be to walk away from their faith.

Survivors consistently claim institutional response adds far greater trauma than the initial sexual abuse ever did.

*Consider:* that the violation of our physical bodies is but small fraction compared to the violation of our hearts, our faith, and our sense of belonging.

Use the proper label: Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse. It is not a moral failing, it is not an affair, it is not adultery; it is *Abuse*.

If my leaders had labeled the abuse upon my disclosure, I would have *still* tried to protect him, but the wall of the confusion would have been breached allowing clarity to begin to seep in. My healing would have started immediately, instead of several months later.

I know survivors who are decades out from their abuse, who are only now coming to realize what actually happened.

Imagine, the pain and hurt I described before, that covered just 4 months of that season, being drawn out for decades! The dejection, the anguish, the shame all could have been relieved if these victims' institutions had shown enough courage to love them like Christ.

Institutional response is entirely up to leadership. If leadership doesn't support the survivor from the beginning, the entire church will support the abuser. Congregants will always defer to the pastor in conflicts of interest, they'll never go to the victim unless they see leadership leading the way to them.

If, upon a victim's disclosure your first thought is for: your reputation, your bottom line, or the church's image. You should not be a pastor.

*Rather*, when confronted with abuse your first concerns should be for the victim. This heinous sin committed against one of God's children should cause your heart to grieve

so deeply that your anguish resembles the same suffering of the one standing before you.

**Third:** Believe the victim

Hire an *outside* organization that specializes in abuse to do an investigation. Look for a system that is survivor-centric, trauma informed, and has experts on staff. If you choose to *also* involve lawyers, be up front and honest with the victim and encourage her to, at very least, bring an advocate to any meetings.

Pay for her counseling without limitations. Let her choose the therapist, let her go as frequently as she deems necessary, and continue paying for as long as she needs.

**Finally:** Hold the offender accountable.

Fire them, revoke their ordination, *expose* them publicly so they cannot harm someone else and, for the love of God, do not praise them as they exit your sanctuary.

I pray, you will never have to experience any of this. But should you find yourself here, be transparent with your church, go after the one, prioritize the marginalized, be patient with survivors, do not require anything from them, above all demonstrate Jesus to your congregation and remember that an untold story never heals.

Thank you.