

Transcript: Rachel on Recovery - Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse

Rachael Stone (Host) and Chellee Taylor (Guest)

In [part 1](#) and [part 2](#) of this podcast, host Rachel Stone of [Rachel on Recovery](#) interviews survivor Chellee Taylor. Chellee articulates her experience of grooming in detail. Chellee shares how after the sexual assault by her pastor/boss, the church she looked to for help retraumatized her. This podcast is an excellent resource to understand how adult clergy sexual abuse plays out over time and how institutions betray survivors.

Tell us about yourself

Well, I am Chellee Taylor and I live in Central FL with my high school sweetheart and our 3 teenagers.

A brief overview of why I am here today would be that two years ago, my pastor, who was also my boss and regularly counseled me through my daughter's severe depression, multiple suicide attempts, and frequent hospitalizations, sexually abused me. He had been grooming me for months, probably years, and when I was at my lowest, he exploited my vulnerability through counseling. I repeatedly told him no but after a couple weeks of constant sexual harassment and his relentless pursuit it ended in assault.

It took me a couple weeks, and the help of a trauma-informed friend, to start to understand that I was a victim of clergy sexual abuse. I went to the police but, while the detective over my case immediately recognized the abuse of power, FL law doesn't protect adults against psychological abuse. I disclosed everything to my church, but they immediately hired an employment lawyer and distanced themselves from me. They lied and told me the lawyer was an investigator so I would cooperate, which I did--trusting the church to do what was right. Ultimately, they used everything against me, forcing me to resign, demanding my silence, and allowing rumors to be spread in their favor. They allowed my abuser to resign, and they sent out an email and shared at each sermon what an amazing man he is and how much good he does for God's Kingdom. They praised him and prayed for him and sent him off with applause.

1. Do you feel like your childhood groomed you to be sexually assaulted as an adult?

I don't know that I would say that it groomed me to be sexually assaulted as an adult but it definitely made me more susceptible to it. I have only come to understand this through counseling, which I started after my most recent abuse. I grew up in a home where hard things weren't talked about. When I was 4 or 5, I told my mom about a person who had repeatedly molested me. She got angry, left the room, and never spoke of it again. There were no consequences, as far as I knew, for the abuser. I was never told it wasn't my fault or that it was good that I came forward, life just continued as if I had never said anything. The silence and lack of ramifications taught me that I was not significant enough to fight for. Others could do as they wanted to me, and I just had to accept it because they were more important. Later, when I was raped at 16, I didn't tell anyone because I accepted that it must have been my fault. Even though I had said 'no' I must have been to blame because it happened. So now, in my 30s when my pastor sexually abused me, it was the same thing: It must be my fault, my 'no' doesn't matter, I have no agency, he is more worthy than I am, it must be acceptable for him to hurt me because it means he is satisfied.

2. What was the grooming process like?

I can't say when the grooming started so it's hard, even still, for me to fully understand the entire process. My pastor pursued me to take a job at the

church. I wasn't looking for work and I didn't think I was qualified for the position he wanted me to undertake, but he convinced me to try it, and he even fired a guy so that he could bring me in. I suspect the majority of the grooming occurred when he would counsel me through my daughter's depression and suicidal ideations because I was much more susceptible in my vulnerabilities there and that is where I developed the most trust in my pastor's care for me. I didn't know it was happening but after gaining clarity post-abuse I can see many things my pastor did or said to groom me. He would say he had something to tell me and then say I couldn't tell my husband. I told the pastor that I would try but couldn't commit. But then the things he told me were inconsequential so I never felt like I was hurting my husband by not telling him. After a few days the pastor would then ask me if I had told, gauging my loyalty to him. Later, when he told me he was in love with me, he told me that he knew I could keep a secret, referencing the times he had tested me.

He touched me often, started small by gently grabbing my arm when he talked to me or wanted to lead me somewhere, putting his hand on the small of my back when I walked past him, rubbing my back when he'd come up behind me, and progressed to squeezing my calves when I was working on a ladder, holding me while I cried in counseling and rubbing my back to then rubbing my neck. A few times he tried to hold my hand but I always pulled away.

He knew I loved hugs, that they made me feel safe but that I rarely initiated, so he would use that. One time, via text, he asked me to come over to his house saying his wife wasn't home. When I didn't respond after several minutes he claimed that text was meant for someone else. We joked about it and I told my husband because I thought it was funny. The pastor was furious that I had told Peter, which I couldn't make sense of at the time. If it was an accident, why was he so upset? When I saw him in person the next day, he actually said to me, "You're in trouble. I can't believe you told me! You need to be punished so I am not going to hug you for a week."

Hugs were a whole different part of that process. We would hug when we first saw each other most days but he started asking for hugs after every work meeting or counseling session I had with him. The hugs had always been loose, casual, and quick, but he started holding me longer and giving me a hard time when I would pull away first. He was probably 6" taller than me but would tell me that I needed to put my arms over his when we hugged. I told him that made me uncomfortable, but he said he preferred it and at that point I was happy to please him, especially with something so simple. He had done so much for me, why wouldn't I want to give a little back? Just before the harassment portion started, when we hugged, he would put his face against mine, so our cheeks made contact. When I would pull away, he would run his hands down my arms until I had backed away enough for him to longer be able to reach me. Finally, I told him I wasn't going to hug him anymore, this was after he started requesting hugs repeatedly, over and over; telling me I wasn't standing right or that my arms needed to be over his or that I backed away too quickly so we'd have to redo it. At one point he lifted the back of my shirt to touch my lower back when he hugged me and then rubbed his hands up and down my sides. Later that same day, after I told him I wasn't going to hug him again, he told me he was in love with me and then repeatedly tried to get me to hug him but I refused.

When he counseled me, he would always make me cry. Not from being harsh but from preying on my hurts and drawing things out, then he would come alongside me and lift me back up, pray over me and be the hero who comforted me, a savior, of sorts.

He constantly complimented me. Often my work, but he would also tell me what a beautiful person I was, saying I was the most beautiful person he had ever met and that the world needed more Chellee Taylors. I always took this to mean internal beauty and never physical. I thought he was talking about my heart. He would always tell me that I was an amazing writer. He encouraged me to write to him and would go on and on about how much my words encouraged him and that God was using me when I wrote to him. He told me that I needed to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and take action to write when I was prompted. He saved all my notes and later, he and the church used them against me, calling them

“love letters” though there is not a single romantic word, innuendo, or any sexual content in any of them, whatsoever. They are purely encouragement and reminders of God’s love and work, written for a man I thought to be my brother.

The pastor would get angry with me if I went to my husband about something I was struggling with instead of going to him. One time he saw a fb post where I said Peter had brought me coffee when he heard I was having a hard day. My pastor immediately called me and asked me why I didn’t find him to talk. Sometimes the things I struggled with were not work related, but my pastor assured me he wanted to be there for me in every area. I thought he was being sweet and really cared for me and all that I was struggling with. This is actually a form of isolation and, later, the police detective over my case would tell me this is called ‘alienation of affection’ when a predator tries to take the affection meant for the spouse, all for himself. Apparently, it’s a felony in many states, of course FL isn’t one of them.

He also brought sexual language into our relationship. One of the last times I let him hug me he talked about having to be careful not to grab my butt, because that’s what he did to his wife. He asked me what I would do if he grabbed me. I told him I would be angry and push him away. In the same conversation he said something about me pressing my boobs against men when I hugged them. I was visibly uncomfortable with this accusation and he added, “I should be able to say ‘boobs’ in our relationship, we’re both adults.” This made me feel like I was being immature and uptight. I thought my squeamishness was my fault because I grew up in a pretty conservative household where several words weren’t allowed to be said—including breasts or any names for reproductive organs. When I asked him how I could help him not to stumble he told me not to take my clothes off. This shocked and disturbed me and I told him I would never do that. He said that was good but continued to talk about how he didn’t know what he would do if I did. I assured him again that I would never do that and I tried to change the subject but he repeatedly brought it back up. This was his way of not only planting thoughts in my head but also desensitizing me to what I would have otherwise seen as a red flag.

There were many other things he did, like using scripture to justify how he wasn’t as bad as David. He told me that David was a murderer and still considered a ‘Man After God’s Own Heart’ and what he, my pastor, wanted to do wasn’t as bad as that. Though I constantly rejected his sexual advances and I told him I wasn’t interested he always used the verbiage of “we” causing me to believe that I was at fault, that what was happening was consensual. There were several times he told me I couldn’t tell anyone what he was doing. He told me I could only go to him and that no one else would understand. When he said that I remember thinking, ‘yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I don’t even understand what’s happening. How could I possibly expect anyone else to?’

3. What have you done for recovery?

- The first thing I did was find a competent trauma-informed therapist. Working through childhood abuse that I was never allowed to talk about, and seeing how I accepted that I wasn’t important enough to stand up for, all led to me being abused repeatedly later. Recognizing this has helped me understand so much about myself, which will allow me to be safer from here on out. It can be hard to find a good therapist and it’s okay to try several before you find one you’re comfortable with. But I think this is instrumental in processing the offenses done against you and the paths that led you into the traps.

- I joined a support group for victims of Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse called, Restored Voices Collective. They’re a group of amazing women that fully understood all the dynamics of ACSA – this has been life altering. I often thought I must be so stupid and foolish to be coerced and manipulated this way. But in RVC, I am surrounded by doctors, professors, lawyers, and other extremely intelligent women. And I have come to realize that a predator’s choice of victim has nothing to do with the victim’s intelligence but everything to do with their target’s level of vulnerability during the time of pursuit.

· Also, learning about abuse and understanding trauma responses really helped relieve the guilt and shame I had about how things played out. *Why* didn't I run, *why* didn't I tell someone, *why* did I let this happen,- were all intrusive thoughts I constantly suffered... but when I learned how grooming worked and how our brains process, *or don't*, during abuse and trauma, I realized I had no control of my body's response and it's not fair to hold myself accountable for that. I have read dozens of books and listened to so many podcasts on this topic and sometimes it's overwhelming and I probably pushed myself before I was really prepared mentally, but on the other side of the worst of it, I am grateful for my perseverance. Being able to label things for what they are and getting to the point to where I could say the word "abuse" -was difficult- but also very freeing and now I can't use any other word because there aren't any that fully envelop all that happened.

· Something, I didn't initially do for myself but, more so, happened to me that helped in my recovery was discovering an attorney who is trauma informed. In a very obscure way, I was made aware of a sexual abuse attorney who happens to live down the road from me. His name is Boz Tchividjian. I contacted him and then my husband and I went to his office for a consultation, and it was very validating, *and* that is when we learned the term 'Clergy Sexual Abuse'. Knowing my rights to litigate civilly made me feel not quite so helpless. With Boz, I decided to go up against the church. Taking on the powerful when I felt crushed and insignificant, was extremely difficult but it brought me so much self-value and made me realize that *I am* worth fighting for. The church underestimated me, they wanted me to break and backdown, to limp away and no longer bleed on their carpet but I refused to give them any more power over me. I am so proud of standing up for myself in this way. My agency had been taken from me but through this process and with Boz's help, I was able to reclaim it.

· Peter and I have always been taught that we needed to be in church to have a healthy relationship with God. So, after we left our old church, we immediately started going to another. We just didn't know any better. And it was awful. I would be so stressed on the drive to church and every single Sunday I would cry during service. It never had anything to do with what the pastor was preaching; I was just so triggered and traumatized... I didn't know how else to cope *and* I didn't know it was okay to just *not* show up. After a few months the church we were visiting hired a new lead pastor, so I requested a meeting with him to see what his views were on trauma and abuse. I brought Peter and a long list of questions to ask him to determine if *this* church, under his leadership, would be safe.

If I'm completely honest, I will say that I requested this meeting with the expectation that the pastor would respond poorly; *this* is what I would use to justify never going to church again. However, the pastor completely blew me away. He admitted he wasn't trauma informed but he talked for 10 minutes about how pastors can't have affairs and it's always abuse because of the power imbalances. He named many people that no one, who isn't at least trying to be trauma informed, would know. I remember sitting there in disbelief as I listened to him and praying, "God, is this what hope feels like? It's been so long since I've had any." When I felt safe enough, in that meeting, I told the pastor that I was a survivor of ACSA. He listened and he never defended the church, or their actions, like many others had. Then he asked if I would allow this church, which we are not members of or serving in any way, to pay for my counseling. This was *completely* unexpected! My former lead pastor-the one I gave 14 years of my life to-had told me that counseling was my responsibility because I had been raped when I was 16.

But here, this man I didn't know, at a church I didn't serve, wanted to put their money where their mouth was, and they have now been covering my counseling costs for 9 months.

Our conversation didn't end with this meeting. *Instead*, we meet each month to continue the discussion of trauma and abuse. Many times, this pastor has taken our words and incorporated them into sermons. He has told us stories about how things on abuse said from stage, have prompted members to share their hurts with him and seek help when they finally realized God didn't want them to stay in an abusive relationship. Because he is willing to listen

and accept criticism when needed, his church is safer, and people are better able to be led by God's love instead of by the church's law. We don't serve, or go to small groups, and sometimes it's still really hard. But now when I cry during sermons it's usually because I see hope and I recognize that some small part of that is because this pastor is willing to sit with my husband and me and gain wisdom from our trauma.

I would never recommend someone who has been spiritually abused to leave their old church and immediately attend another. It is possible to have a beautiful and healthy relationship with God without stepping foot in a church or watching sermons online. You don't need a man on stage telling you what God's Word says to make you a good Christian. By the time we realized we didn't have to force ourselves to go to church we were in a place where we were seeing changes made because of our experiences. I'm grateful we're where we are but I also think ...we made it a lot harder than was necessary.

I don't know that the act of going to church has helped in my recovery but meeting with my pastor each month has helped tone down my cynicism. I have been able to find hope that local churches can be a safe place and perhaps they can fully resemble what the Church of Acts is described as. These open conversations have helped soften my skepticism of pastors. Not all pastors are in their positions because they love power and control. Meeting with my pastor, as well as working with Boz, I have been able to push through my fear of men. I am still hypervigilant when men are around and I still tense up if someone touches me, even by accident, but I also know that I have agency now. I can set and hold boundaries and I *don't* have to apologize for it.

· But hands-down the biggest contribution to my recovery has come from my husband. Again, not something I did for myself but still something that has brought me to where I am now. He understood that I was pursued before I did, and every time I doubted myself, he reminded me of truth. There were times I wanted to just agree with the church's implication and say it was an affair so they would love us again. Afterall, an "affair" would be so much easier than what had actually happened. But Peter wouldn't hear of it. He wasn't willing to let me sacrifice my integrity-as the church so willing had. He not only saved my life, but he showed me it is better to stand on truth than have the support of hundreds of people who refuse to hear it.

4. What have you seen help with other people's recovery similar to yours?

Top two would be having a competent trauma informed counselor who understands Clergy Sexual Abuse and a support group.

A therapist can help with understanding your past so you can have clarity in your present. They also give you tools to help you when you find yourself triggered or filled with intrusive thoughts. A counselor gives you all the time and space to talk, telling your story somewhere safe is extremely healing and helpful in processing exactly what happened and working through all the grief that comes with recognizing the multiple levels of betrayal.

A support group is kind of the opposite. You have room to share but most of your time is spent listening. In RVC I found others who understood my deepest wounds. All the doubts, fears, rejection, and betrayal I suffered, they had also experienced and could fully relate. Also, hearing their experiences gave so much insight into my own. So many threads of commonality are woven throughout our stories and being able to hear others give words to their abuse brought me a lot of clarity in mine. There is so much healing in just understanding what was done. Before this, I was just so confused. I couldn't make sense of anything

at all but now I can label each step of grooming and abuse properly. This is where things finally started to fit together for me.

5. How has this impacted your community?

I no longer have one. At least not locally. The church—though they repeatedly told me behind closed doors that the pastor was wrong, that he abused me, took advantage of me, abused his power and traumatized me—they would not support me publicly. After all those years serving, tithing, giving, working and living life with these people who claim to love Christ, not one of them ever tried to show us love. That betrayal was very deep. . . . Our entire community was wrapped up in the church, which we now realize should have never been the case but it's what we had always been taught was right. When I disclosed the abuse, the leaders of the church allowed rumors to be spread because it was better for these lies to be accepted than for them to admit they employed a predator who preyed on their sheep. I was basically excommunicated. Eventually, I decided not to honor the church's demand for my silence, and I shared the truth with a couple people I knew were safe, giving me a *very* tiny support system.

6. How has that impacted your marriage?

Peter and I got married very young. The first couple years of our marriage was very difficult, but we figured it out and the following 18 years after that were easy. And I do mean easy. *Parenting* was hard but our marriage never was. We never fight, or even argue. We may disagree but we learned early on that we had to communicate to resolve issues as they arose. Men would seek Peter out for marriage advice. Ladies constantly told me they wanted what we had. I have no problem saying that being married is the easiest and most rewarding thing in my life. When our daughter started struggling with depression, I constantly thanked God for giving me Peter to go through it with. I would never wish this hurt on anyone else, but I was so grateful for my husband.

After the abuse, everything turned upside down. Initially, I didn't know what had happened. My pastor told me we had an affair. It didn't make any sense to me but I didn't know what had happened so that's what I told Peter. It was so hard. He asked me questions and I answered all of them as fully and honestly I could. After hearing a jumbled mess of what I had been enduring in the weeks prior, Peter told me that my pastor had pursued me. I tried to protect my pastor, I've since learned that's what victim's often do, but Peter repeatedly told me this was my abuser's fault. It took me a couple weeks before I had clarity on predators, grooming, and manipulation and then it was several more months before we really had proper labels for things. I would tell Peter everything. Anything I felt shame or guilt over, anything that seemed trivial but came to mind. If a man talked to me at the store, for any reason, I would rush home and 'confess' to Peter like I was hiding something if I didn't. I probably overshared many times, but I didn't want to hide anything from him. Even when I thought it would hurt him, I knew he deserved to know it all. Every time, Peter would take those feelings of shame and guilt that I held for myself and help me properly redirect them to the ones who deserved it, my pastor, and the church leaders. He constantly reminded me of my own words that I said to my abuser, and helped me fight the intrusive thoughts and underserved shame.

I really struggled. I thought God didn't love me anymore and I didn't understand why he was causing me to continue to live in total darkness. I wanted to kill myself. I had a plan and had written suicide notes multiple times over. I thought if I died the church would rally around Peter and they would love him again. He would have his community back and they would support him and the children.

At a counseling session with Peter present, I told him and the counselor these things and Peter looked right at me and said, "I don't want them! I only want you!"

I tried so hard to convince myself that the world would be better off without me. I could make excuses about our kids being old enough to no longer need me and I could see how-in my depression and complete uselessness-I wasn't being a mom to them anyhow. But I just couldn't convince myself, no matter how hard I tried, that Peter would be alright if I were to die. He's the only reason I didn't take my life. It had nothing to do with me wanting to live but only not wanting him to suffer any more pain.

It's crazy to me to think that before all this I really didn't think that our marriage could be any better but somehow, all this horrible trauma has brought us even closer together. I thought we shared everything before but I realize that there were things we tipped toed around because didn't want the other to hurt or maybe we were embarrassed we were upset about something that perhaps was petty. Now, we share every tiny thing. We know allowing the other into our heart where we're ashamed of the mess brings us closer together and often find that the others perspective from the outside is what we need in order to see beyond our own chaos.

My marriage is what saved me. Unfortunately, this is not usually the case. Many survivors' spouses struggle to understand the power dynamics, the preying on vulnerabilities, and strength of imbalanced authority and control. Even if they try to work through it the abuse from another man can scar the marriage and cause division, sometimes even divorce. Which inevitably causes more trauma to the already suffering.

Peter had his own struggles too though. In part because this man who claimed to be his friend, who just a couple weeks prior to the disclosure celebrated Peter's birthday with him, but was only there because he was trying to figure out how to have sex with me, and neither of us had any clue. It was one day after Peter's birthday is when my pastor told me his intentions to have sex with me. The betrayal cut deep. But it was compounded by the rejection of the church and coming to terms with how quickly they chose my abuser over us. We both felt so disposable. After all those years serving, tithing, giving, working, and living life with these people who claim to love Christ, not one of them ever tried to show us love. That betrayal was very bottomless. After much time, Peter started seeing a therapist and, on her recommendation, went to a rage room to help relieve his anger. These things helped him a lot and then, he started a group for secondary survivors from RVC, so the men could all have the same system of support us ladies experienced in group, from those who understand better than any.

7. How has this impacted your reputation?

Oh, it's completely devastated. I used to be loved and known, I held many leadership positions in several ministries and now I can barely go to church. I had influence and was respected, but now I am seen as a Jezebel and kept at the distance of a leper.

8. How has it impacted your social life?

It was completely devastated. My entire community, the only family I had known for the past 14 years completely abandoned me and my family. I was overwhelmed with darkness and despair, and I wanted to die daily. In fact, every night I would pray that God would let me die and every morning, as soon as I woke up, I would immediately start crying because I hadn't. I refused to leave my house because it is impossible to go anywhere without running into someone from the church. I'm in a small town and the church is the largest in this part of the county and I feared what people would say if they saw me. I have heard awful rumors about myself, each one making me physically ill, but not a single person reached out to me to see if any of it was true, which none of it is. People I considered my very best friends completely ghosted me and took my abusers' words as gospel truth. I tried to convince myself that Peter was enough, and I didn't need friends, but the loneliness was suffocating. Slowly, I acquired a few people who wanted to care for me. If we met in public, I would ask that we meet a few cities over to limit who we may run into. Two years later, I am willing to meet closer to home, but it is fairly infrequent. I won't go to local events because I know I am not welcome. I feel like my kids have to

miss out on fun things because people care more about their church than they do about loving people like Christ. With my support group I have a whole new community and even just on Twitter I have found people who understand and walk with me but none of these people live locally, which makes it difficult sometimes.

9. How has this impacted your career?

I was forced to resign after the abuse. I had worked there for about a year and half, and while I wasn't looking for a job when I was approached, it was nice to have a little bit of extra income each month. After the disclosure, I was completely worthless. I couldn't make any decisions, even getting dressed took me hours and several changes because I couldn't trust myself to make good choices. Thankfully, we were in an okay spot where my loss of income wasn't devastating but it still hurt. In the last two years both our daughters graduated from high school. They still live at home but they're more independent. Our son is just 14 thought and still mostly homeschooled so I'm happy to be here for him. About a year after the abuse, I started thinking about work again. I always took a lot of pride in my work and not being able to contribute financially to my family is something I struggle with, though my husband never complained. Getting a job locally isn't really an option. My town is small and the church is large and I'm still afraid of running into people I know from there. If I dwell on these thoughts too long my mind goes to dark places. Also, the thought of having a male supervisor terrifies me. It's strange for me to accept that this is where I am. I used to be a crime scene technician. 90% of my co-workers were men and all of my supervisors were and I never felt unsafe. But now, because of my pastor, thoughts alone debilitate me.

10. How has this impacted your parenting?

When everything went down, my younger daughter was in a full-time residential facility for her depression. I was so grateful that she was away because I was completely useless. I mostly just followed my husband around and sat quietly in whatever room he was working in. I couldn't think enough to make dinner or even engage in conversation. I really couldn't do much more than cry. My physical health suffered, which further impaired my judgment and abilities. I was unproductive and incapable, I couldn't care for myself let alone my children. On one hand I'm glad that my kids were all teenagers because they didn't need me for routine tasks but on the other hand, I grieve that they're old enough to where they will always remember this dark period of our lives. It was a couple months before we shared with the children what had happened. It was obvious I wasn't okay, there was no question there, but once they were made aware I allowed myself to feel their grace, though they had never withheld it. Knowing they saw my pain and understood where I was, helped me try harder. Breaking those generation curses from the family I grew up in, where hard things weren't talked about, was so relieving. I didn't *have* hide my hurt (not that I ever succeeded in that anyway).

We let the kids ask questions and we answered the best we could. They didn't need to know all the terrible details but they had the right to understand why our entire lives had changed overnight. More so, they deserved to know that they are important enough to fight for. Keeping the abuse the pastors put me through, from our children was not protecting them. Pretending anyone who holds authority is trustworthy, does more harm than good. Furthermore, understanding that I have agency has helped me create a space in my children's life where they understand that for themselves, and they're given them room to exercise it.

11. How has this impacted your faith?

Right after the abuse, I dug hard

into God's Word. I tried to maintain the same discipline I had before the abuse and dove even harder into it after. But I found it all very triggering. Those words were used by my abuser to harm me *and* by the church later to justify casting me aside.

My abuser and the leaders would pray over me, but then they hurt me more than anyone in my life ever has. *Everything* related to God was tainted. The element of spiritual abuse was a huge obstacle to my healing. I never doubted God existed, but I came to a place where I fully believed he must not love me at all. I knew when I prayed, he could hear me but decided he just didn't care and I would tell him that. I would pray, "I know you **don't** care about me, but I have no one else and I'm not okay." I don't know why I kept praying, maybe I wanted him to prove me wrong.

It was the first time I was in an existential crisis, and it was a result of me being betrayed and forsaken by my spiritual leaders. Before, when I was suffering with what God was doing, I always had a pastor to talk to, now I had no one at all.

Time after time, through the whole process with the church, there were so many ways God could have brought the truth to light, but, again and again I was devastated when he didn't. The truth remained hidden, or intentionally covered up, and I was made to suffer as a result.

After finding resources about spiritual abuse, I was able to heal some. *Again*, being able to name things and understand helped. My husband and I are still deconstructing many aspects of our faith. We still love Jesus and his Church (big C), but we have found freedom in being able to question our beliefs and find the answers ourselves in his Word, instead of from what a man spoke at us from a stage.

My relationship with God is very different now than it was pre-abuse. It's not better, but it's also not worse. It's different, and I have total peace about where I'm at, and that includes not being able to pray much or worship with the band.

I do have hope that *someday* I will enjoy those things again, but I know that God grieves with me in my pain and, right now, that's enough.

12.What do you do for self care?

My husband often tells me that I am happiest when I have a project and I find that when I don't feel productive my mental health suffers. I love to make our house into a home by creating and beautifying things. Maybe it's the control I have when I create things that I enjoy. I get to choose where to cut, how to combine pieces, pick out the colors, and build something that wasn't there before. I love working with power tools. It makes me feel strong and gives me a sense of accomplishment.

But it's never lost on me when I tear something apart and rebuild it better and more beautiful that that is exactly what God often does to us. I had a wall with water intrusion once and tore it down to the cinderblock, cutting out the damaged wood and removing points where integrity was lost. After I found the point of intrusion I built the wall back up, reinforcing it with new furring strips, a heavy footer board, adding insulation, and finally drywall. But I went beyond that and trimmed out the window to bring distinction and contrast against the flat wall. It's stronger inside now, but you can't see that part. You *can* see the new outer beauty that was built on that inner strength though. The trim adds character and catches your eye, it draws your attention and forces you to acknowledge its presence. I feel like that is what God with us.

13.What would you like to say to encourage other survivors?

You are not alone. Even in the moments of utter darkness and despair there are others that completely understand your hurt. Give yourself grace.

Healing is a form of growth. Anything in nature that is known for being strong tends to grow very slowly. You cannot expect yourself to embrace the full warmth of the sun when you've been buried so deep in the dirt you can't see your way out. Just like a seed you must push your way to the light. *You* have to do the work and you *have* to give yourself time. There's a reason that tiny sprouts are called 'starts'—they finally got out of the dark, but they have so much further to go and like them, our growth is not linear. Healing requires us to branch out in so many directions. Just like the abuse touched each part of our lives, our healing must do the same. We begin by straightening ourselves and then we branch out. We reach out and extend in all directions searching for beauty and comfort.

There are days when storms will break some of our limbs, cause our leaves to fall, or cover us in muck. Those days are dark, and we think we can't bear it but if we hang on, we'll see the sun again.

The process is so slow but one day we may wake up and find hundreds of tiny blossoms. New life grown from hard work and perseverance. Beauty, we didn't know we contained bursting forth in a way that no one can deny. When we look back during our healing our progress is evident, no matter how little, but eventually, where we started is so far below that we can now only see our own growth and no longer the dirt that once consumed us.

14. What would you say was the most important piece of advice somebody gave you in your journey of recovering?

Your story is valuable and not everyone is worthy of holding it.

I was so eager for anyone to love me post-abuse and church abandonment that I felt like I had tell them everything so that they would know what happened and care for me. There were a couple people who I trusted that only hurt me further by listening. Some blamed me for my abuse because it made it easier for them to reconcile their own past. Others said they wanted to be there but refused to let me share my heart and told me I needed to move on. Those people didn't really care of me. They cared about the toxic church and were trying to do damage control while simultaneously checking of their 'Christian duty' box. The betrayal by these ladies crushed me more than those who had just ghosted me altogether.

Be careful who you trust with your treasure. There *are* safe spaces and you get to choose who hears you, not the other way around.