



Engage: Youth Ministry & Contemporary Issues Pastor or Predator? Sexual Misconduct in Youth Ministry

Introduction:

Over the past twenty years, the scandal of clergy sexual abuse has played out in the public imagination through award-winning journalism and film. Much of the attention has been focused on the Catholic Church, with a particular eye on priests and child sexual abuse. With limited success, scholars and leaders have attempted to provide an answer to the inevitable questions of cause, blaming everything from mandatory celibacy to mandatory reporting.

Despite this broader attention, the truth is that clergy sexual misconduct is not a “Catholic problem”—it is a human problem and one that is as real and complex in every faith tradition as it is appalling. Transcending race, class, gender, denomination, and geography, clergy sexual misconduct occurs in ministries big and small, old and new, innovative and routine. Further complicating these variables, youth ministry adds an additional layer of nuance, as teenagers themselves are growing and transforming into full sexual maturity. In this issue of Engage, scholars, survivors, and ministers wrestle with these human problems.

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Articles

Response: Catherine Thiemann

The Church's Must-Do List

When college freshman “Jenny” had questions about God, she emailed the pastor who had led her church youth group’s annual service project. He suggested they meet for coffee. As they sat in the booth at the coffeeshop, “Pastor Gary” rested his hand on Jenny’s thigh. Startled, she told herself this must be okay. After all, Gary was a married man, a camp leader, and a minister, and he’d known Jenny since she was in junior high.

As they continued meeting, Gary kept pushing Jenny’s boundaries. She didn’t know how to refuse a man she admired so much. Two years later, Jenny finally realized that Gary was sexually abusing her. To report him, Jenny had to break a promise to her own youth pastor, who had asked her not to turn in his friend and colleague. Although the investigation substantiated Jenny’s complaint, neighboring pastors continued sending their youth groups to Gary’s camp. Feeling helpless to protect vulnerable young people and now being shunned by her former youth pastor, Jenny became suicidal.

How can we protect lives like Jenny’s? We can start with a few basic steps: get background checks before hiring anyone to work with children or teenagers, require at least two adults to be present for any activity with minors, and teach youth leaders to maintain appropriate boundaries with those in their care. These measures are a necessary start, but they don’t go far enough. If a youth leader has predatory intentions (and sadly, some do), we must take stronger measures.

Following are steps the Church must take to create a safe and nurturing environment for young people.

1. It’s not enough to do background checks on clergy and staff. We must also vet the leaders and volunteers of any ministry in which our youth groups participate. We are responsible for keeping our young people safe, even in church activities outside our direct control, such as camp and community events.

2. We need to teach youth workers and ministers that their pastoral role doesn’t end when their charges become adults. Although in some states a minister can legally sexualize a pastoral relationship with an adult, it is always harmful and wrong. Since a congregant might have a hard time saying “NO” to her pastor’s sexual advances, she can’t truly say “YES.” The power differential makes meaningful consent impossible. This is especially true in youth ministry, where leaders may come to occupy a quasi-parental role in the minds of young people.

3. In addition to training youth leaders, we also need to make sure that our young people

understand boundaries. As part of their faith formation, young people need to know that their bodies and their sexuality—both gifts from God—are theirs alone. They need to know that the Church expects their leaders to keep them safe as they grow in faith and to never, *ever* violate or exploit them. They need to feel the power of their own voices saying “NO.” Although factors such as poverty, disability, or a history of abuse may make some young people especially vulnerable, the truth is that all teenagers are vulnerable while they try to understand their changing bodies and feelings. We need to reach every young person in the Church, every year, with age-appropriate boundary training.

4. This training will only succeed if it takes place in a culture of transparency and openness. Therefore, we must offer the same training to adults and encourage regular congregational discussions about power dynamics and healthy sexuality. Ministerial sexual abuse thrives in darkness and secrecy. To keep our young people safe, the Church must shine a continuous light on this topic.

5. Even with all these precautions, young people may still experience abuse from their leaders. Therefore, each congregation must develop and publicize a clear process of response. Young people should know who to call if a leader harms them. Any response should protect and support the complainant while the process plays out. When the church substantiates a complaint against a youth leader, that person should never again hold a position of trust with youth. If a youth leader has sexually violated a child or teen, the church must inform local law enforcement.

I’m happy to report that Jenny is now a thriving young adult. Through her courage and hard work—and with the support of an exceptional minister—she has substantially recovered from the trauma of clergy sexual abuse. But she will always carry the knowledge of how her church betrayed her. Her painful memories are the result of our sin as Church. If Jenny had taken her own life, her death would have been on our hands. We can do better for our youth. I firmly hope we will.

Catherine Thiemann is an advocate for survivors of clergy sexual abuse. She writes about survivors’ journeys and the Church’s imperfect response on her blog: SurvivorsAwakenTheChurch.com.

Response: Linda Crockett
A Matter of Power and of Justice

He called it adultery. Sin. Infidelity. He admitted he was selfish and that he failed to repent when confronted about his inappropriate “relationship” with a student. He spoke of how his arrest and felony conviction hurt his marriage and ministry. Never once did the youth pastor name what he did as child sexual abuse in the lengthy apologia published in the online *Leadership Journal of Christianity Today* (6/14/14), “[My Easy Trip from Youth Minister to Felon](#).” It was only at the end of the article laced with biblical references that he casually mentioned the student was a minor under his care as a pastor.

The self-serving, duplicitous nature of the article caused such an uproar on social media that the editors apologized and took it down, citing among other problems, their failure to recognize that the post implied mutuality and consent when in fact there can be no such thing when an adult sexually violates a child.

We can read this story as a parable about child sexual abuse in the Church and the response of those who hold power. A pastor holds power that would preclude a truly consensual relationship with an adult parishioner, let alone a child. The editors, like many Church leaders, did not recognize that the pastor’s language of sin and redemption, submitting to God, and focus on the harm done to himself and his loved ones is typical of offenders. Like Tamar, the daughter of King David raped by her half-brother Amnon (see [2 Samuel 13](#)), victims are encouraged to hold their peace and “not take it to heart,” while offenders get a platform to claim redemption.

Oftentimes, forgiveness is prioritized over justice, and victims carry the burden of shame that rightfully belongs to the offender. By and large, the Church refuses to recognize child sexual abuse as a social justice issue that demands truth telling and accountability. A typical response these days is to dole out some money for counseling to the victim—a necessary act, but hardly the vindication they deserve. “We are taught,” one survivor observed to me, “to absorb the pain.”

Let us be clear about the pain carried by the victim. With one in four girls and one in six boys sexually abused before age 18, it is critical that we understand that abuse is not over when the molestation stops. PTSD is common, and yet these veterans of a hidden war are not recognized for the courage it took to survive. Survivors are often impacted for decades, suffering psychological, physical, social, spiritual, and economic damage. Sexual abuse can destroy a child’s faith in herself, in other people, and in God.

Youth ministries are particularly vulnerable because so many children grow up in churches and families that teach them little or nothing about how to stay safe from sexual harm. Healthy boundary curricula for children from pre-K to 12th grade are essential, as are establishing a number of safe and knowledgeable adults at each church that kids can go to with any concerns. We are rarely reluctant to teach young people about the dangers of drugs and alcohol, and yet we

shy away from frank discussion about sexual offenders and how they operate: drawing their intended victim into a relationship to gain their trust. We don't tell them most offenders are not strangers, but people in our families, churches, neighborhoods, schools, and sports clubs.

We incorporate all of these elements into our [Safe Church program](#), working with groups of congregations in an intense one year process of shifting church culture to proactive engagement in protecting children. It is not merely the quick fix many leaders want—a boilerplate policy coupled with a little training.

And yet there is hope. It lies in the intergenerational nature of the faith-based social movement we are building to end child sexual abuse, a stream flowing into the broader river catalyzed by secular organizations. Young leaders are becoming engaged, stepping up to protect children and empower survivors to lead. They do not believe that silence protects anyone.

A young woman in college accompanied her grandfather to one of our [Survivor Wisdom Circles](#). He was molested as a boy, and despite decades of ordained service in the Church and counseling, the trauma continues to affect him. His granddaughter was deeply moved by what she heard in the Circle, reflecting on her own experience as an advocate for rape survivors on her campus. As we closed the Circle, I expressed the hope I felt in young leaders like her. Her face lit up, and she said *“I am not the only one. You have no idea of how many of us there are, just on my campus. We are ready. And we are coming.”*

The power is shifting.

Linda Crockett is the Director of [Safe Church/Safe Places](#) with the Samaritan Counseling Center. She was the vision behind the development and design of Samaritan Safe Church in 2011, which grew out of her work as a consultant to congregations experiencing the often contentious dynamics that occur when a child is molested by a lay or ordained leader. Under her leadership, Safe Church expanded to a national training platform. In 2016, she began work with the newly formed cohort of grantees and fellows of the [Just Beginnings Collaborative](#) on social movement building to end CSA. Her work focuses on shifting culture in congregational and other key settings so that adults are proactive about protecting children from sexual abuse throughout the community, creating a web of Safe Places with trusted adults.

Response: Sharon Ellis Davis
 Holders of Secrets of Sexual Abuse in the Church

The article's headline read, "[The same Bible that is used against women, LGBTQ individuals, and other marginalized identities is simultaneously used to shame survivors and privilege harm-doers.](#)" What does this headline have to do with sexual violence?

I am a product of the Black Church and very proudly hail it as the place that taught me all about Jesus. Yet, I have done very little to call the Church out on its duplicity, culpability, hypocrisy, and complicity in the many ways and tactics pastors within my own Black Church tradition have played into the sexual victimization of vulnerable children, youth, and adults. This article headline has everything to do with sexual violence.

As both a retired police officer and a pastor who served in both capacities for over 31 years and as a survivor of domestic violence, I have called these institutions out on the patriarchy and misogyny that has contributed to and encouraged violence against women.¹ I have conducted trainings for faith communities through my relationship with the [Faith Trust Institute](#) on issues of Interpersonal Violence (IPV); on how the Church can provide pastoral care to victim/survivors, theological clarity in preaching, and accountability for abusers; and on creating a safe place for victims. I speak publically on issues of intersectionality, discussing to how issues of race, class, gender, culture, and the criminal justice system impact victim/survivors of IPV. I have spoken truth to power.

Yet, with the exception of a cursory conversation about sexual violence, I have never publically admitted that my Black Church experience also includes my being the victim of childhood sexual abuse by "men of God" who preached against homosexuality, women in the pulpit as pastors, adultery, fornication, sex before marriage, and other behaviors they considered to be sins. And in spite of such a strict doctrinal/ethical stance, many of these same pastors thought it "of God" to sexually abuse the very members in their congregation to whom they were called to serve and care. Yes, I never mentioned this. It was the secret I was determined to hold on to no matter how much this abuse had negatively impacted my life choices and rendered most of my intimate relationships unsustainable, at best, and pathological, at worst. I could not, and I would not go against the "men of God."

Yes—many childhood victim/survivors of sexual abuse by pastors hold on to this secret, live with the pain, and attempt to push the abuse deep down inside, not even realizing the damage it is doing to their minds, bodies, and spirits, especially as they carry this secret into adulthood.

¹ See Sharon Ellis Davis. *African American Battered Women: A Study of Gender Entrapment*. (Edwin Mellen Press: Lewiston, NY), 2014.

Sexual abuse by pastoral leadership is not only a problem in the Black Church, nor as widely publicized, in the Catholic Church. This abusive behavior can occur in all faith institutions where there are predators or those who would choose to cross the boundary of power and vulnerability with those they serve. Yet, it is important to use my context as a cathartic starting point for my conversation of sexual abuse in the church. As leaders in the Church who provide care for youth, children, and young adults, we must all be careful not to betray their trust and use our power to enter into sexual relationships with those to whom we have been called to minister.

Many times, we are also called to be holders of long-held secrets. In our one-on-one relationships or within larger groups, we might be the very people called to be the “holders of secrets of childhood sexual abuse,” entrusted by an adult to receive in pastoral moments. Professor and scholar, the late Emma J. Justes of United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, writes of the pastor as a holder of secrets. She states, “I have heard many stories of secrets preceded by the words, ‘I thought I would take this to my grave with me.’ And ‘I have never told anyone this before.’ These words signal the necessity for the person hearing these words to establish a private sacred space—realizing how important it is to listen at these moments.”²

In my experience as a pastoral care provider, I have been the holder of the painful secrets of adults who, as children and teens, were sexually abused by their pastors. The secrets can be painful for the teller of the secret as well as for the listener. Like me, the listener may not have adequately dealt with his or her own childhood victimization and are now forced to remember while providing care for others. Meanwhile, the healing of the victim/survivor is greatly dependent on the ability of the listener to be a holder. This is an absolute first step in the healing of childhood sexual abuse.

I know the importance of finding a holder because I began to heal when I finally found one. For me, my holder was not and could not be in the context of the Church. My holder was my mother. Still, as part of the healing community, I believe that ministry with others calls us to prepare to be holders as well as healers, doing no harm and loving justice!

“To be called beloved is not only to shatter the silence, but to get rid of it altogether; we owe one another respect and the right to our dignity as people of God. If we deny justice, we are telling those who go without that they are worthless... Folk need to hear the church say in a clear and unequivocal voice that sexual and domestic violence are not acceptable behaviors but they are lethal values.”

Emilie M. Townes, “Washed in the Grace of God.”

² Emma J. Justes, *Please Don't Tell: What to Do with the Secrets People Share* (Abingdon: Nashville, TN), 2014.

Questions for Reflection

How can we as pastors and spiritual leaders who hold such secrets and provide safe space to listen?

As holders, what do we do with our own anxiety?

How can we as pastors and spiritual leaders who hold these secrets open our hearts to what follows such provocative words?

Have we as pastoral leaders adequately addressed our own secrets, which have plagued us for years, as we prepare to be holders?

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Response: Hilary Scarsella

Speech as Prevention: Talking to Youth About Sexualized Violence

How would you talk about gun violence in your youth ministry if you knew that at least one in five of the girls in your group, one in twenty of the boys, and a comparable number of your trans and genderqueer youth would be shot before age 18? When it comes to sexual violence and abuse, these are the conservative numbers.³ If we account for the fact that an estimated 60% of those abused as children and youth never tell anyone and may not be represented in these statistics, the scope of the problem erupts.⁴

Sexual abuse and assault are perpetrated against minors by peers, older youth, and—though we don't like to face it—by family members, pastors, youth leaders, and other trusted adults. At least 90% of the abuse youth experience is perpetrated by someone they *and their families* trust and know well.⁵

I offer these numbers not to create a collective sense of fear but to paint a picture that many of us working in the Church prefer not to see. The youth in our congregations are experiencing abuse. It is not a question. It is not a possibility. It is happening. We need to make it our regular practice to talk about sexual violence accurately, sensitively, and often, because talking about abuse and assault has a significant degree of power to prevent and stop both.

Sexual abuse and assault are silencing. Sometimes victims are silenced by perpetrators who threaten to hurt them or their loved ones if they tell anyone about the assault. Other times, those who are abused are silenced by shame, by fear that they will not be believed or supported, or by the trauma of the assault itself. Trauma leaves those it touches psychologically paralyzed and speechless. It fragments memory and forcefully distances a person from themselves, from their own experience, from a sense of confidence in their knowledge of the event in question, and from their loved ones and community as a result.

Because sexual violence and trauma silences those who suffer them, and because silence prevents access to tangible and inner resources that make survival and healing possible, talking about sexual violence is not just an intellectual exercise. It is an act of care and solidarity that can help bring victims and survivors themselves to voice, and thus, to resilience, recovery, and into the process of remaking a life worth living in the aftermath of traumatic harm.

I run a network of support for survivors of sexualized violence, called [Our Stories Untold](#). Many of these survivors were abused as youth by authority figures in their Protestant congregations. Our central mission is to give survivors a platform and to support them in coming to voice. Survivors who connect with us often choose to tell and publish personal accounts of their

³ <https://victimsofcrime.org/media/reporting-on-child-sexual-abuse/child-sexual-abuse-statistics>

⁴ https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Statistics_1_Magnitude.pdf

⁵ https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Statistics_2_Perpetrators.pdf

experiences through our blog. To date, every survivor who has chosen to complete this process has expressed that the experience of speaking up in an environment of educated and committed solidarity offered them a sense of freedom from the silencing impact of the abuse, and therefore, from the abuse itself. Within contexts of committed care, speech has the power to transform individual lives, communities, and the systemic dynamics that enable sexual violence to continue in North American homes and churches.

Not just any old speech will do. The kind of speech that can interrupt cycles of sexual violence is the kind that believes and respects victims and survivors, the kind that empowers youth to love and protect their bodies, and the kind that is informed by a sincere comprehension of what sexual violence is, how it works, and what responsibility bystanders, families, and congregations have to strive against it and to stand with survivors.

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Response: Justin Holcomb

Six Devastating Effects of Sexual Assault—and How the Gospel Responds

Sexual assault is occurring at epidemic proportions in our society, and the gospel of Jesus Christ responds to survivors with help and hope. The statistics on sexual assault are staggering: at least one in four women and one in six men are or will be victims of sexual assault in their lifetime.

Survivors of these assaults experience many devastating physical, psychological, and emotional effects. The most prevalent include denial, distorted self-image, shame, guilt, anger, and despair. If this is you or someone you love, the gospel of Jesus Christ responds to each of these.

1. Denial

Sexual assault often causes a survivor to feel alone, unimportant, and unworthy of sympathy. Denial and minimization are common coping strategies in the face of such pain and trauma. Initially, these strategies may help to create a buffer while a survivor starts to deal with the emotional upheaval, but eventually, denial and minimization will actually increase the pain because the actual psychological destruction and trauma are not addressed.

God does not deny, minimize, or ignore what happens in sexual assault. Through Jesus, God identifies with and has compassion for those who suffer. God does not want survivors to stay silent or to deny their experiences, but to feel and express their emotions, to grieve the destruction they experienced. The cross shows that God understands pain and grief, and the resurrection shows that God has conquered sin—that God is reversing sin’s destruction and restoring peace.

Because of Jesus, survivors of sexual assault have the privilege of confidently approaching God’s throne of grace in the fullness of truth. God does not shun the needs or cries of survivors, but hears them and is filled with compassion ([Hebrew 4:14-16](#)).

2. Identity

Sexual assault is also an attack on personal identity, telling survivors that they are filthy, foolish, defiled, and worthless. It can leave them feeling that they are nothing.

The gospel is a gift of a new identity through the redemptive work of Jesus. Through faith in Christ, a person is adopted into God’s family and given the most amazing identity—child of God ([1 John 3:1–2](#)). God adopts and accepts each of these children, compelled by love. No person can do anything to deserve God’s love. It is freely given, even to those who feel unlovable.

The gospel also proclaims the good news that Christ’s righteousness, blamelessness, and holiness is attributed to those who have faith in him ([2 Cor. 5:21](#)). In Christ, one’s identity as a child of

God is deeper than any wounds. This new identity is secure because it is achieved by God in Christ. God's children belong to God and will never be disowned.

3. Shame

Sexual assault survivors experience feelings of shame, rejection, and vulnerability. This pain and confusion often causes survivors to be acutely aware of their perceived inadequacies and failures. Survivors often report struggling with feelings of nakedness, rejection, and dirtiness.

Jesus reveals God's radical love for God's people by covering their nakedness, identifying with those who are rejected, cleansing their defilement, and conquering the Enemy who shames them. God extends compassion and a mighty, rescuing arm to take away the shame of the world. Jesus both experienced shame and took the world's shame upon himself so that it no longer has power over those who are oppressed by it. Because of the cross, God does not identify God's people by what they have done or by what has been done to them. In Jesus, God's people can be fully exposed, completely made new.

4. Guilt

Survivors of sexual assault are also frequently attacked with guilt that can lead to feelings of condemnation, judgment, and self-blame.

It is vital for survivors to understand they are neither guilty of the crime nor the sin that was committed against them—and this realization alone can bring great freedom.

Nonetheless, a survivor's feelings of guilt often go deeper than what was done to them. As a person aware of his or her own ordinary human sinfulness, a survivor of sexual assault can be overwhelmed by their experiences and can confuse their trauma with culpability.

Survivors of sexual assault need to hear the stunning message of grace in Jesus Christ, who was forsaken on the cross for the forgiveness of the world's sins. When a person trusts in Christ, all of their sins—past, present, and future—are forgiven. All of them. All threat of punishment, or sense of judgment, is canceled. Through faith in Christ, a person is loved, accepted, and declared innocent before God.

5. Anger

Survivors of sexual assault often also experience anger at what has been done to them. While anger can be a natural and healthy response to the unquestionable evil of sexual assault, many survivors struggle with knowing how to manage and express it. Survivors are sometimes even discouraged from expressing their anger, but suppressed anger can hold them hostage to feelings of vindictiveness and bitterness. Bottling up these emotions, survivors can instead become reliant on substances to manage their pain and may turn away from God and others.

Survivors can trust that God is angry at the evil and harm done to them—angrier, even, than they themselves can be. Participating in God’s anger against injustice and sin is a healthy way to express their anger, and survivors can boldly cry out to God to keep the promises of destroying evil that harms others and defames God’s name.

Anger expressed to God is expression of trust in the One who is strong and able to bring healing and restoration. Because vengeance belongs to God, survivors of sexual assault can experience freedom from the exhaustive cycle of vindictive anger, which often continues even after the limits of the criminal justice system.

6. Despair

The aftermath of sexual assault can fill a survivor with despair. Feeling that they’ve lost something—whether it’s their innocence, youth, health, trust, confidence, or security—can take root in a survivor and deepen into hopelessness. On top of that, depression can add a seemingly inescapable weight to the experience of despair.

The gospel gives hope to survivors of sexual assault. Biblical hope is sure because God promises hope and a future. This hope is grounded in God’s faithfulness in the past and a promise of faithfulness in the future.

Because of Jesus’ resurrection, all threats are tamed for those who trust in Christ. Jesus conquered death and evil, so an evil perpetrated is not the end of the story. Because of this, survivors can have hope. Jesus rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and is making *all things new* ([Rev. 21:5](#)). God is strong, and God alone—not the evil that is perpetrated—will have the final say. This is the hope that animates the “groans within ourselves” ([Rom. 8:23](#)) that everything will someday be renewed. God’s people will be delivered from all sin and misery. Every tear will be wiped away when evil is no more.

Not Your Fault

Survivors of sexual assault must understand that what happened to them is not their fault. They are not to blame. They did not deserve it. They are not responsible for what happened to them. Nobody had the right to violate them. They were supposed to be treated with dignity and respect. They are not worthless. They were sinned against. Despite all the pain, healing *can* happen and there *is* hope because there is grace.

Trusting Jesus isn’t a faint hope in generic spiritual sentiments but is the radical act of banking one’s hope and future on Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose from the dead. Grace is available because Jesus went through the “valley of the shadow of death” ([Ps. 23:4](#)) and rose from death. Jesus responds to survivors’ pain and past. The gospel engages human life with all its pain, shame, rejection, lostness, sin, and death.

So now, to those in pain, the gospel says, “You will be healed.” To those feeling shame, the gospel says, “You can now come to God in confidence.” To those feeling rejection, the gospel says, “You are accepted!” To those feeling lost, the gospel says, “You are found and I won’t ever let you go.” To those who sin, the gospel says, “You are forgiven and God declares you pure and righteous.” To those who die, the gospel says, “You were dead, but now you are alive.” The message of the gospel redeems what has been destroyed and applies grace to disgrace.

Justin S. Holcomb is an Episcopal priest (serving as Canon for Vocations in the Diocese of Central Florida) and teaches theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Reformed Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Lindsey have written three books about abuse ([*Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault*](#), [*Is It My Fault?: Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence*](#), and [*God Made All of Me: A Book to Help Children Protect Their Bodies*](#)).

Response: Wes Ellis

Indwelling the Theological Story of Sexual Misconduct

My youth pastor was my hero. It's that simple. When I was in 7th grade and started going to youth group, I had an immediate connection with him. He was a funny, likable guy—two things I aspired to be—and he had a passion for worshipping God and engaging Scripture. He was well-loved by the community and respected by his colleagues from other churches. Our youth group wasn't large, and it wasn't exactly one of those "attractional" youth ministries, but it was a very relational ministry. That was my youth pastor's style. And it was the kind of youth ministry where spiritual formation and theological reflection were taken very seriously. It was in that youth ministry, under my youth pastor's mentorship, that I found my own calling to youth ministry.

So imagine what a shock it was—and how difficult it was—when I heard that he was facing allegations of sexual misconduct. By that time, I was in college, one that I chose in no small part through the influence of my youth pastor. The newspapers in my hometown were already condemning him, and the people in the community had made up their minds that my mentor was a monster.

Before this news broke, my youth pastor and his wife had occasionally taken troubled teens into their home, and it was something I had admired about them. As the story became public, however, I learned that he had been sexually assaulting some of the young girls he had invited into his home.⁶ These girls were friends of mine. And when I first heard the allegations, I have to confess, I didn't want to believe them. It made no sense that my friends would lie about the things he'd done to them, but I just didn't want to believe that a man I thought I knew so well—a man from whom I'd learned so much about God and ministry—was capable of such offenses.

I was slower to draw conclusions about the situation than the newspapers and the community were. But eventually, while I was still in college learning about ministry, I did accept that my youth pastor was one of the guys who appears in articles like these. And let me be honest: it still doesn't sit well with me.

⁶ In this case, the form of sexual assault was statutory rape. It is tempting, in these cases, to avoid the term "assault," but according to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), sexual assault is defined as any sexual contact that occurs without explicit consent. See "Different Types of Sexual Assault" SexInfo Online, <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/sexinfo/article/different-types-sexual-assault> (accessed July 27, 2017). Legally, this is assault because of age difference—youth under 18 are legally unable to give consent—but, more importantly, we must call it assault because of the manipulation and exploitation of power dynamics inherent in statutory rape, especially when it concerns clergy and youth.

Eventually, my youth pastor went to prison, and I completely lost touch with him. To this day, I couldn't tell you what happened to him after that. But I still carry around this ambiguous recognition that his life—and the time I spent under his mentorship—has forever affected me.

Experiences of sexual assault in youth ministries are far too common, and far too frequently, no one is really prepared to address them, either pastorally or personally. There are different questions we ask and stories we tell in trying to process them. We usually ask questions about the victims themselves, and rightfully so. *How should we care for the people who were violated? What is their story?* Or we ask questions about the perpetrator. *What sickness or distortion caused him to do such a thing? What is his story?* But we also need to ask questions and tell the story of others who were less directly but still significantly affected by the situation—people like me and the other members of my youth pastor's congregation.

In many cases, the stories we tend to tell are psychological or therapeutic ones. We might consider the four- (or five-) stage grieving process as a way of telling the story.⁷ Or we may turn to other social-scientific models of interpretation to help us understand the complexities of sexual misconduct in the Church.⁸ Even as important as these interpretive moves are and as helpful as they can be, we also must—as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ—tell the theological story.

We cannot be satisfied with immanent responses to transcendent questions. It will not do for us to move directly from interpretation to strategy. We must first name the situation for what it is. And what we have before us in situations of sexual misconduct are not just psychological stories, but stories of hamartiology and theodicy (sin and evil).

According to John Swinton, chair in divinity and religious studies at the University of Aberdeen, “not to introduce sin into our narrative is to create a false world and a false consciousness within which grace is cheapened beyond recognition.”⁹ We must recognize that situations of sexual misconduct are situations of *sin*. In doing so, we reminded that, first of all, this is not just some tragic occurrence and the victims are not victims of mere suffering, but of “radical suffering” and evil.¹⁰ Their pain is not just tragic; it has been inflicted upon them by the will of another. Sin must be understood as having both tragic and *moral* elements.¹¹ Secondly, we will be reminded that sin is committed not by monsters but by human beings “for whom the possibility of

⁷ See Gerald Arbuckle, *Grieving for Change* (New York: Continuum, 1991).

⁸ See Candace R. Benyei, *Understanding Clergy Misconduct in Religious Systems* (New York: Haworth Press, 1998). See also Nancy Myer Hopkins and Mark Laaser, eds. *Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995).

⁹ John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 57.

¹⁰ Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*, 11.

¹¹ See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 36-39.

redemption is always real and available.”¹² For me to come to terms with my own story is not for me to dismiss my youth pastor as some special species of evil, but indeed it is to accept that the person who was eventually imprisoned for sexual misconduct and statutory rape was the same person who mentored me, cared for me, and helped me to find my calling. He was not a monster, but a human being like me and like all of us.

In recognizing his actions as sin and not only as psychological disorder, I am forced to face the sin of which I myself am capable, and I am invited to offer it to God for healing and restoration. By telling the theological story of the situation, I open it to God’s action, and I am able to allow God to assume it into God’s self. “What has not been assumed [into the life and being of God] has not been healed; it is what is united to his divinity that is saved...”¹³

What the theological story allows us to do is not rush to “solve” the problem of sexual misconduct in youth ministry, but to actually indwell the problem and to grieve it. It is vital that we do not treat this as an abstract philosophical problem or a problem of mere policy, but as a real human experience. As Swinton reminds us, “[r]aw pain inevitably inspires hard questions. The problems arise when we try to answer them.”¹⁴

What the theological story does that the psychological or procedural story can never do is turn the questions of the story—*How should we feel about this? How can this be resolved?*—over to God.

When we turn the questions over to God, what we might discover is that God, rather than lofting answers and solutions toward the problem, indwells the problem in Christ. We might discover that the answer to the question, “Where is God in this situation?” is “Right here.” We might find that the God who went to the cross is present even in situations of abuse and violation. “The message of the cross... locates God firmly within the realm of human suffering.”¹⁵ When we bring our situation of suffering and allow it to be held within the story of God’s suffering, we may discover that our suffering is assumed into the life of God through Christ and is redeemed in God’s raising of Jesus from death.¹⁶

I have not *solved* the problem of my own experience. The situation of my youth is not *resolved* for me, but I am now able to indwell it. When we find ourselves as ministers serving youth who have experienced situations of sexual misconduct in the Church (or elsewhere!), it is our responsibility not necessarily to *resolve* the problem or to bring young people *through* the

¹² Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*, 60-61.

¹³ Gregory of Nazianzus, Epistle 101.32.

¹⁴ Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 71.

¹⁶According to Jürgen Moltmann, “The resurrection ‘does not evacuate the cross’ (1 Cor. 1:17), but fills it with eschatology and saving significance.” Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 182.

problem, but to tell the theological story and to offer a space for youth to *indwell* the problem—to bring their questions before God so that they might discover God indwelling their suffering with them.

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Discussion Questions

1. What are the policies and procedures in your ministry context for responding to clergy sexual abuse? How familiar are your clergy, staff, volunteers, and students with these policies and procedures?
2. What steps does your ministry take to teach healthy sexuality and boundaries to youth and adults? How can you promote a culture of health and integrity?
3. How is God present with us in situations of injustice and pain? What are the practical implications of a theology of *indwelling*?
4. How can the Church create space to process and grieve sexual assault while upholding survivors?
5. How does our understanding of the *imago Dei* (the idea that human beings are created in the image of God) influence how we respond to sexual violence in our ministries?
6. How do religion and culture view and portray sexuality differently? In what ways do our attitudes about sex dictate our behavior? In what ways does our discomfort with sex result in a climate of silence or misinformation?