

Saving Bathsheba

by Rachel Marie Stone

Abuse at the hands of a spiritual leader damages victims in body, mind, and spirit

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
Psalm 34:18

“How much responsibility did Bathsheba have in that affair? After all, she was bathing where David could see her!”

I have heard this line, and others like it, many times in the course of my evangelical upbringing and education—the David and Bathsheba story used as an example of “why women should be modest” and “how temptresses can bring down godly leaders.”

But that’s not what the story is about. It’s a story of a woman being sexually abused by a man in power.

Samantha Nelson of The Hope of Survivors says that this “blame the woman” emphasis is all too typical: “Seminaries could do a better job teaching pastors not to abuse power. It seems like the emphasis is more the other way—on warning pastors away from ‘predatory’ women.”

Nelson’s former pastor used the story in a very different way. According to him, if David could be “a man after God’s own heart” despite being an adulterer and a murderer, then certainly he, her pastor, could be forgiven for abusing her sexually and spiritually, which he did for several years. After recovering from the abuse and earning credentials in Christian counseling, Nelson cofounded with her husband, Steve, an organization called The Hope of Survivors, “a worldwide ministry of compassion providing support, hope, and encouragement to victims of clergy sexual abuse and misconduct.”¹

An important part of The Hope of Survivors’ work is to educate people about clergy sexual abuse, which is often misunderstood as simply an “affair.”

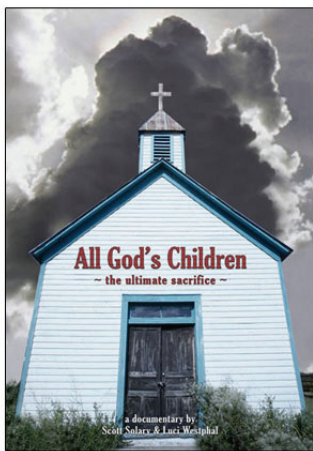
“The devastation of this abuse is that it is so poorly understood, and survivors are subject to all kinds of insensitive behavior—such as being asked, ‘Didn’t you like it?’ Because of the power imbalance, this can never be a consensual relationship,” says Nelson. “A teacher or a doctor cannot enter into a consensual sexual relationship with a student or a patient. Neither can a pastor with someone under his care.”

It’s not that affairs don’t happen, Nelson tells me, but her ministry sees far more instances of pastoral abuse. “We see a lot of predatory pastors. It’s more often the case than not that a pastor will have abused more than one person. Sometimes there’s a young, inexperienced pastor who crosses a line, but generally we see a lot of repeat offenders who pick out vulnerable people and groom them for

All God's Children

All God's Children tells the story of a boarding school for missionary children in West Africa and the abuses the children endured there at the hands of missionary staff. It took the children decades to acknowledge the effects the abuses had on their lives. When they finally dared to break the silence and speak out, the church denied all allegations and refused to help. But through years of persistent activism the survivors and their parents finally compelled the Christian and Missionary Alliance to conduct an investigation and acknowledge the abuses.

The investigation of the Mamou Alliance Academy was the first of its kind but has since inspired investigations at other schools of many different denominations. Learn more at AllGodsChildrentheFilm.com.



abuse.”

Women who have been abused previously or who are enduring health problems are sometimes targets for abusers. Abusive pastors often work by engaging in a counseling relationship with potential victims.

A pastor in New York, Reverend Latham,² told me about two abusive pastors in his small church's history. "A certain pastor—a Reverend Elliot—in the 1930s and 40s had, according to one of our oldest members, a reputation for 'fooling around'; he even had a second entrance built onto the back of the parsonage for his counselees to go in and out of."

This pastor's reputation, according to Latham, was repeatedly confirmed by separate testimonies. "An elderly pastor from Long Island once told me a story about my predecessor: There had been a big Baptist rally, and, as the [all-female] choir was singing, Elliot said, 'How do you like some of the young ones? When they come to me, I don't know whether to pray with them or lay with them!'"

Another abuser came to the little church years later, nearly destroying it in his abusive wake. He also worked, Latham told me, by "doing a lot of counseling. In this way, he got people to reveal their secrets and was then able to threaten people with the revelation of those secrets." Reportedly, the pastor threatened to discipline and excommunicate one woman's entire family if she would not perform oral sex on him.³

"One of the saddest aspects of clergy sex abuse," writes Christa Brown, a lawyer, author of *This Little Light*, and founder of StopBaptistPredators.com, "is that it not only inflicts the grievous trauma of sexual abuse but it simultaneously yanks a powerful resource for healing." Faith, says, Brown, "will often serve as a resource for dealing with all manner of life's travails," but often not for those who have been abused by clergy and by other people in positions of religious authority.

That's the situation for many of the survivors of the decades-long abuse perpetuated by the missionary staff at Mamou Alliance Academy in Guinea, Africa. Some of its alumni were the first to speak publicly about the physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual abuse that occurred there—and in other Christian and Missionary Alliance schools that the children of overseas C&MA missionaries were required to attend. Their story is documented in the film *All God's Children* (see sidebar on left), and a number of them point out how the abuse caused them to lose—or come close to losing—their faith. One remarks that he would need "a Damascus Road experience to be saved." Another, Rich Darr, who eventually became a minister in the UMC, says that for years he "could not walk into a church...[without experiencing] tremendous anger."

Some researchers point out, perhaps rightly, that male clergy are no more likely to commit abuse than other males,⁴ but pastors who abuse violate what Nelson calls "a sacred trust" that makes the abuse all the more devastating. In Catherine Marshall's novel *Christy*, the character Alice describes how the man who raped her at 16—a traveling Quaker minister—"groomed" her for abuse using his clerical office:

That year when I was 15 there was a certain amount of experimentation, what he called "the laying on of hands." Some of it I thought odd all right, questioned it in my own mind. But the man was so much older than I. And we children had been taught to think of these "traveling Friends" as such divinely chosen oracles of the mind of God that almost every word they spoke was supposed to be inspired.⁵

Survivors of pastoral abuse aren't simply turned off from people in positions of religious power—they are turned off from faith communities when those communities fail adequately to engage their wounds with compassion and understanding.

Future Hope

The Hope of Survivors is celebrating its 10th anniversary. While their website has thousands of hits per week, they are contacted by two to three survivors a week, or more than 100 per year. Many of these are assigned to volunteer support. Samantha and Steve Nelson hope to build a healing center—like a retreat—a place for survivors of pastoral abuse to reconnect with God and their spouse; a place for physical, spiritual, and emotional healing. No such dedicated space yet exists anywhere in North America. Learn more at TheHopeofSurvivors.com.

leged crimes. It might mean that the Southern Baptist Convention (and other denominations and associations) would establish coherent processes for investigating pastoral abuse, as Christa Brown has repeatedly advocated.

Hope and healing for perpetrators of abuse is possible, says Samantha Nelson, but her ministry has found it difficult to work with them.

“We have tried to include offenders as part of our ministry, and it hasn’t worked well. Most are looking for some kind of excuse.”¹¹ For as many as use King David’s story to excuse themselves and to blame Bathsheba, fewer, it seems, are willing to make as full a confession as David. Perhaps worse, too few faith communities seem as willing to speak into situations of abuse as boldly as Nathan did.

Lord, have mercy.

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It is precisely that reverence that makes healing so difficult for survivors. Indeed, it can be hard even to open the door to healing in situations where idolization of the abuser—or of the abuser’s office—makes finding the truth difficult. It took 10 years of writing and calling Christian and Missionary Alliance offices before the survivors of abuse at Mamou Alliance Academy were heard; even after an Independent Commission of Inquiry found that physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual abuse had occurred among “a significant number” of children at Mamou for at least two decades, one of the alleged abusers—a man who reportedly raped a student—remained on C&MA staff. There was, they said, “nothing they could do.”⁶

When I talked with Christa Brown, she noted that when survivors of clergy sex abuse speak of their inability to connect with faith communities after abuse, “they usually speak more about the faith community itself rather than solely about the minister who abused them.” Failing to hear and address

the concerns of survivors, failing to initiate a process for investigation and healing, and simply failing to apologize all have the effect of revictimizing survivors.

More recently, the blogger Libby Anne⁷ raised the concern of organizational complicity—or, at the least, indifference—in the wake of The Voice of the Martyrs’ executive director’s suicide. Tom White took his own life as he was being investigated for molesting a 10-year-old girl, but Voice of the Martyrs’ statement does not apologize; rather, it says “none of those in leadership at VOM, including our board of directors, were aware of these allegations at the time of Tom’s death.”⁸ Baptist Bible College in Pennsylvania has suspended naming a new athletic building after former Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE) president Wendell Kempton, not because Kempton himself was accused of abuse, but because he appears to have poorly handled a case of missionary-perpetrated sexual abuse. ABWE terminated Donn Ketcham in 1989 after a confirmed report of child sexual abuse but made no further investigation. Some also suspect Kempton of neglecting to investigate another possible case of missionary perpetrated abuse.⁹

“It is a huge blind-eyed mistake,” says Christa Brown, “for faith communities to seek to explain the harm of clergy sex abuse by focusing only on the clergy-perpetrators. Faith communities must take a hard look in the mirror and begin to see the ways in which they themselves inflict egregious additional wounds through complicity and through a failure of compassion.”¹⁰

Survivors of pastoral abuse aren’t simply turned off from people in positions of religious power—they are turned off from faith communities when those communi-

ties fail adequately to engage their wounds with compassion and understanding. The often misused story of David with Bathsheba offers an interesting perspective here: When, in 2 Samuel 12, the prophet Nathan confronts David with what he has done, he promises that the violence David has perpetrated will “never depart” from David’s house. “...You did it secretly,” says Nathan, “but I will do this thing [enact violence against David’s household] before all Israel, and before the sun.” It’s then that David confesses, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

Leaving aside the enormously problematic question of retributive justice, it appears that what made David’s sin possible was secrecy, and what brought forth his confession of guilt was the threat of exposure. For the sake of justice—and for the sake of healing—faith communities must acknowledge that compassionate attention and full apologies are needed. This means that, for example, The Voice of the Martyrs should issue an apology regardless of whether or not they were aware of Tom White’s al-

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