

## When the Abuser Is Among Us: One Church's Response to a Perpetrator

by Carol J. Adams

Recently, a church in which a leading layperson had sexually abused two boys asked me to consult with them about the appropriate responses they should offer to the abuser, the victims and the congregation. At the time that they approached me, the incidents of sexual abuse were more than two years old. The victims and their families were no longer attending this church, but the abuser continued to do so, including dropping off and picking up his children from Sunday school. The church itself had been paralyzed by not knowing how or whether to respond. Each year's group of leaders inherited the legacy of silence that had marked the church's initial inability to recognize that they had the right and urgent necessity to respond as a church. The call to me was precipitated by the impending trial of the abuser for one of the incidents of abuse. The leaders of the church were discussing whether they should issue a statement upon the conclusion of the trial and wanted to work with me on the appropriate content of such a statement. The conflict in the church about this matter had become more intense. It was arranged that I would meet with the church leaders for three hours, leading them through a discussion of both the appropriate and inappropriate responses.

In preparation for that meeting, I re-read Marie Fortune's *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* and Carolyn Holderread Heggen's valuable new book, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*. I also turned to Judith Herman's immensely helpful and insightful book, *Trauma and Recovery*.

The night of our meeting, I began by reading from Mark 5, the part that tells of the touching of Jesus by the woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years. Some in the church might be like the disciples, impatient, urging Jesus forward, "Do we still have to discuss this? Isn't it over? Why not just move on?" I explained that there is always a desire to push for speedy forgiveness and reconciliation, but that the church's goal must be to be a naming and healing congregation, to model living with integrity. I identified three choices they faced as a congregation.

- 1) **Naming versus denial.** Naming creates the environment for providing support for both the victims and offenders, allowing the congregation to work more openly and effectively. It requires saying, "Sexual abuse is a sin. If sexual abuse has happened among us, it is our business."
- 2) **Offering safety or doing nothing.** Of central importance was comforting and protecting victims, as well as working to prevent further violation. To the victims, they needed to say, "It was not your fault," and "We are sorry this happened."

- 3) **Accountability or collusion.** I explained that in responding to the abuser it was essential to focus on *behavior*, not characteristics; otherwise we may succumb to the great temptation of identifying with the perpetrator and the perpetrator's pain instead of being focused on the victim's pain. Identification with him can mean that we feel anxiety over his being called to accountability and may prevent us from doing what he most needs. Within Christian communities there is often confusion about calling to accountability in that we think that being loving and Christ like is releasing someone from their sufferings, rather than saying, "I will be with you as you experience the consequences of your behavior."

I urged them to remember the sin against the church as well as against the victims; this was why a response to a sexual abuser is different than a response to an arsonist (unless the arsonist had burned down the church). I also reminded them that there were many other victims and survivors of sexual abuse who were watching the church to see what it would do in response to this now public case.

I then read these powerful lines from Judith Herman: "All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain." I suggested that churches that are bystanders will be seen as churches for abusers. In fact, it turned out that some congregational members were disconcerted by the lack of response by the church leadership. I asked where has Jesus' voice been heard in all this? Where does our faith call us? The congregation could either welcome the abuser, ignoring his behavior and thinking it was nothing that they had to do anything about (especially since it had now been adjudicated in court), or they could address his behavior, saying, "*Abusive behavior is a choice and I hold you accountable for it. We care enough about you to hold you accountable for it.* There is a part of you that desires a better life, a healthier relationship. We will be an ally of that part of you that gravitates toward change, but we will continue to judge that part of you that resists change and hurts another."

Based on the model that Carolyn Heggen offers in her book, I proposed that they develop guidelines for the abuser regarding his participation in the church and that these guidelines be shared with the entire church.

We discussed a variety of responses to be offered to the congregation and community, from educational activities to litanies of lament for the sin of sexual abuse. I urged an ongoing commitment to prevention, such as sexuality education classes for young people, the implementation of sexual abuse prevention curricula, insuring that all on the pastoral staff were trained to respond to sexual victimization, and that the church library had current material on sexual victimization. Through prevention, I explained, they would say to the victim, "We are sorry this happened, but we are going to learn from this and are going to try to prevent it from happening again."

It could be said that my presentation was like the priming of a pump: providing direction and a model that allowed them to act. They began to recognize how they themselves had been paralyzed by the perpetrator's controlling behavior and that justice called for them to hold him accountable and offer healing to the victims and the congregation. This church was not going to be a bystander's church. Taking to heart the suggestion that they should develop guidelines for the perpetrator regarding his participation in the church, they did so. Indeed, what they developed was a remarkably detailed document; the final document, which you will find below, is not as specific. With the permission of the pastor, this document is reprinted here, with references to the specific perpetrator and church removed.

### **General Guidelines of Participation for Perpetrators of Abuse**

For purposes of this guideline, *Perpetrators of Abuse* are those who have been convicted of or have confessed in a court of law to physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse of others. The congregation holds these guidelines as a minimum standard under which perpetrators of abuse shall have access to this Christian fellowship. Specifics of the nature, victims, and the perpetrator of the abuse shall determine unique definition, interpretation and enforcement parameters required regarding each individual perpetrator.

#### **Message to the Perpetrator:**

Abusive behavior is a choice and we hold you accountable for it. We care enough about you to hold you accountable for it. There is a part of you that desires a better life and healthier relationships. We are an ally of that part of you that gravitates toward change, but we will continue to judge that part of you that resists change and hurts others. We care enough about all people who desire access to this Christian fellowship to establish these guidelines for your access so that everyone may reasonably expect freedom from direct and indirect hurt.

#### **Our Christian fellowship with you is extended subject to the following:**

1. As defined under these guidelines, you may personally participate in this Christian fellowship as it worships in the sanctuary and as it studies God's word in the church school class of your choice. You shall seek and receive authorization for any other participation as outlined under **Interpretation, Monitoring and Enforcement** prior to such participation. At any other time, your sole access to church facilities is limited to the most direct route from the parking lot through the main entrance to only the church office, save those instances noted under C. below.
2. We expect you to comply fully withal restrictions and requirements placed upon you as a result of any legal actions. Any violations of these legal conditions shall be considered a violation of this covenant and may be cause of complete re-evaluation of the application of these guidelines. [In this regard, we request that you provide a copy of any judgments, conditions of parole, or other documents in which restrictions on or requirements of you as a result of convictions or judgments are stated. Due to the nature of your abusive behavior and what the Minister and the governing board of the church have come to know about the healing of perpetrators of such abuse, you shall

continually participate in a professional counseling program, specifically addressing these behaviors, for the entire time you desire access to this Christian fellowship; further, we strongly suggest that you commit to a continual professional counseling program for yourself for life.]

3. We will stand by you and your family as you accept and experience the consequences of your behavior. Our Christian love for others requires that you be subject to the following:
  - A. You will not accept any leadership or representational position within or on behalf of XYZ Church. [This guideline shall include your not being a sole performer or member of a group performing or making presentations before said entities.]
  - B. In your pursuit of fellowship within this church, you will not enter or pass through any portions of the church facilities other than those along the most direct route from the parking lot to the sanctuary or the parking lot to your church school class of choice, save those instances noted under C. below. [You may not pass through portions of other facilities to move between the sanctuary and your current church school classroom. Should the location of your church school class change, you shall seek clarification of this guideline as outlined under **Interpretation, Monitoring and Enforcement** below. This guideline, in essence, prevents you from going to restroom facilities; therefore, you should make whatever preparations are necessary in advance so as to not expect a need to access the restrooms within the church facilities. Should an emergency arise regarding restroom use, you shall be responsible for getting a male Elder or male adult Deacon to be in your company.]
  - C. At church-sponsored functions for families, you may attend with, but at no time leave the immediate proximity of, your family. [This guideline, in essence, prevents you from going to facilities alone or with a family member; therefore, you and your family should make whatever preparations are necessary in advance so as to not expect a need for you to access the restrooms within the church facilities. Should an emergency arise regarding restroom use, you shall be responsible for getting an Elder or adult Deacon to be in your company.]
  - D. At no time shall you deliberately place yourself or remain in any location in or around the church facilities that would cause undue distress to others participating in or seeking access to this Christian fellowship or its affiliations. [This guideline specifically excludes your being in the parlor or the library, or in or near the nursery elementary, junior high, or high school facilities for any reason whatsoever.]
  - E. No less than once per calendar year, and as otherwise requested by the Minister, you shall meet with and report to the governing board of XYZ Church, regarding your status of adherence to these guidelines. See 2 below.
  - F. Be advised that should you decide to relocate your membership to or substantially attend another congregation during the period of your sentence, parole, or probation, the governing body of XYZ Church will, in response to their

acknowledged Christian, ethical and moral duty, seek to inform the leadership of any such congregation of the factual conditions under which these guidelines were made applicable to you.

**Your Christian love for others should extend, as you are able and fully committed, to the following:**

1. As a part of your growth and penitence, you shall prepare and deliver written acknowledgments of apologies for the pain caused directly or indirectly by your actions as defined in any judgments for abuse rendered against you. These several acknowledgements and apologies should be separately addressed to at least your victims, the families of your victims, your own family, and the members and supporters of XYZ Church. Requests for forgiveness should not be included in these documents, nor should you hold to expectations of immediate forgiveness from those to whom they are delivered.
2. You shall prepare and deliver a written statement to the governing board of XYZ Church regarding your commitment to your healing and your pursuit of the healing process, including a detailed description of you past, current and planned actions. See E. above.

**Interpretations, Monitoring and Enforcement**

Interpretations, monitoring and enforcement of these guidelines shall fall primarily to the Minister and governing body of XYZ Church and their designates. The Minister and the Chair of the governing body of XYZ Church, or a designate of either, shall be the sole contacts for your initiating any communications regarding the interpretation, monitoring or enforcement of these guidelines.

This document may evoke at least two different responses: that is too severe or that it is too lax in that it allows the perpetrator to rejoin the church community. The grace in this document and the efforts the church leaders put into it is that the perpetrator was welcome to return to the congregation. But the stringency of the document was necessary: this was the most caring thing the governing board could do because it allowed the person to continue to participate, while indicating "this is the way you are welcome in the church."

The church elders met with the perpetrator and his wife. They explained the purpose of the guidelines and worked their way through each specific item. The pastor told me that the document sounded much harsher as they read it aloud to the perpetrator. But he also reported that the perpetrator told him, "I have abused people in several churches, and this is the first church that has talked to me about it."

At this time the wife is attending a different church, and it looks as though the perpetrator, when released from jail, will no longer attend. But the guidelines are offered as a model for

other churches as they struggle with responding to the perpetrators in their midst. After all, if we heed Jesus' call, there is no such thing as a bystander's church.

*Carol J. Adams is the author of Woman Battering (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1994). This article was taken from Working Together newsletter, Volume 14, No. 3 Winter 1993/Spring 1994.*