Multi-Faceted Abuse

By Samantha Nelson

During this month's Clergy Sexual Abuse Awareness & Prevention® campaign, I have been able to observe many responses to the campaign activities. Some of the responses received were favorable, while others were not. Some people wrote with great understanding, while others wrote from their own lack of knowledge about the issue. None have shared from the perspective of which I write today.

You see, there are many facets to clergy sexual abuse. There is the obvious victim, the pastor-abuser, the congregation and the community. While most people will probably never have to become involved in any facet of this type of abuse, it is still such a prevalent problem that one is likely to fall into at least one of these categories--or know someone who has--during the course of a lifetime.

Steve and I have been in multiple categories, observing the multi-faceted issue of clergy sexual abuse from its various perspectives. It all started, for me, about 25 years ago. Steve and I were dating and I was taking Bible studies from a pastor of a large college church, in preparation for my baptism. Just before I was to be baptized, the news hit--this pastor had allegedly become inappropriate with one of his students. We couldn't believe it! How could this happen? As members of the congregation, we feared the worst, hoped for the best, and may have failed to make the correct judgment calls during this time of distress. For us, it was a matter of wanting to know the truth. Yet, where do you find truth when the alleged perpetrator may be lying? We went to the pastor. We asked him if the allegations were true. He denied them. He claimed he was innocent. We believed him--although there still remained somewhat of a question mark deep in our minds. Since we didn't know the victim, there was no way to ask her for her side of the story.

The sad part is, we followed this pastor even when he stepped down from his position at the college church and started having his own meetings elsewhere. This fact,
unbeknownst to us at the time, would play a part in our vulnerability in the future. When this pastor moved away, we became "sheep without a shepherd," scattered and alone. Jeremiah 23:1 tells us, "Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the Lord."

Years later, actually a couple years after The Hope of Survivors was founded, we discovered the truth about this situation. God always has a way of bringing truth to the forefront! This pastor, whom we loved and adored, was in fact guilty. Not just of abusing one woman, but many women. It saddened us, yet it also answered the question that had remained deep in our hearts over the years. We had been deceived. The pastor had lied to us. We had supported him and continued to worship with him when he was guilty--and guilty of much more than we even knew about at the time.

So, yes, dear parishioner, I know what you're thinking and feeling when you hear for the first time that your pastor has behaved inappropriately or is guilty of sexual abuse of a member of the congregation. It is unbelievable news. However, what we have learned is that the news is often more true than you care to believe and it is worth exploring the truth. Don't blame the victim. If you have been deceived by the pastor, think about how much more so the victim was!

Now, fast-forward about 14 years to 1999-2000. I am in the middle of an abusive relationship with my own pastor. I hadn't wanted it. I tried to prevent it, and I tried to end it--many times. It was driving me to the point of suicide and, only by God's grace and my husband's diligence, did I survive the multiple suicide attempts I made. The pastor cunningly took all that I had shared with him about my past abuse and used that information against me, to groom me and to take advantage of my deepest fears and vulnerability.

Having experienced clergy sexual abuse myself, I now know what those poor victims must have felt like when the congregation believed the pastor was innocent and chose to support him. I experienced some of that myself, as a victim. People found it very difficult to believe the pastor could do such terrible things. Thankfully, God provided a support system for me--my precious husband and a few dear friends who supported me with their prayers and love. And, thankfully, God has now provided a support system for victims of clergy sexual abuse around the world through The Hope of Survivors. Those who serve through The Hope of Survivors know and understand what victims have experienced. You, dear victim, are never alone.

Now we come to the present. In 2009, Steve became a pastor. He was called of God to enter pastoral ministry, a very sacred and high calling. As we served in our first district, it became very evident how the previous pastors I mentioned above betrayed their sacred trust and took advantage of those who looked to them for guidance, for God's love, for reassurance and hope.

One precious young lady, who will forever remain our spiritual daughter in Christ, drove the point home in our minds. She didn't do or say anything; she was simply herself. As we would counsel and pray with her, wiping tears from her eyes and guiding her in the ways of God, we could recognize her vulnerability. It made us think, "How could anyone possibly hurt someone who is in such a state of vulnerability?" It made us realize what a truly sacred responsibility it is to be a pastor and wife, to have the charge of a flock, to care for God's children. Knowing how we could never look at this young lady and seek to harm her in any way, helped us see more clearly how different things could have been for me, had my pastor chosen to look at me through the eyes and love of the Lord, rather than his own eyes of lust and eagerness to overpower and control.
Clergy sexual abuse is, in my opinion, the most devastating form of abuse there is. Why? Because of the God factor—the spiritual component. In no other type of abuse does God play such a huge role. Many victims are led to believe (by their abusive pastors) that this is God's will and plan for their lives. Where can one turn for help when the Source of help and healing appears to be implicated in the abuse itself? It is devastating in every way—emotionally, physically and spiritually. Not to mention often financially and within the marriage as well, since many marriages never survive such an attack.

So, when people make comments that The Hope of Survivors is "pastor bashing," "slandering the church," or "creating an organization out of one instance," or some other such nonsense, I smile to myself and reply (by God's grace) that these accusations are the furthest thing from the truth. Attacks like these are often made in ignorance, but sometimes they are made as a result of covering for another's, or perhaps one's own, sin. Redirecting, finger-pointing, blame-shifting and the like serve no beneficial purpose.

Let me make clear our purpose for you. For one, The Hope of Survivors' mission is to help victims heal from clergy sexual abuse. Secondly, it is to provide educational seminars and resources to pastors and church leaders in order to help prevent clergy sexual abuse from occurring. Thirdly, our goal is to help churches become healthy and safe places of worship by providing an opportunity for understanding and healing within the congregation itself. Finally, how could The Hope of Survivors engage in an activity that would discredit clergy when my husband is a member of the clergy? That would be ridiculous! Not to mention self-defeating.

No, Friends, I write from a multi-faceted perspective on the issue. Steve and I know from experience what it is like to be an innocent and deceived (often manipulated) member of the congregation when news of abuse breaks forth. We know from experience how easily a vulnerable person can fall prey to a predatory pastor. And, we know from experience what a sacred privilege and responsibility we have as shepherds of the flock. There is a reason James writes in verse 1, "My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation." The responsibility and accountability to God and others is great.

By God's grace alone, we will never know the last facet of this type of abuse—that of being the abuser. I would write that it could never happen to Steve because I know who he is, and he is incapable of doing such a thing, but we have this admonition in 1 Corinthians 10:12, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." Therefore, I will state with boldness that, as long as Steve and I remain in the hands of the Lord and in His will, this evil will not befall us and we will cause no harm to others in this way.

For those who do abuse the flock under their care, God has strong words for you found in Ezekiel 34:2 (and on), "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?" God describes abusive pastors in Jude 1:4, "For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." If you are a pastor and are abusing someone in your congregation, please stop and seek help now. This is NOT God's plan for you, or for the one you're abusing.

I love what God says in Jeremiah 23:3-4, "And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. And I will set up shepherds over them
which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith the Lord." God is working to save those who have been abused by clergy.

As for The Hope of Survivors, Steve and I (and all who serve through this organization) strive to be the shepherds that will gather the scattered sheep, feed them, and nurture them back into a loving relationship with the True Shepherd. May God help us toward that end!