

Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse: Consequences of a Secretive and Unregulated Profession

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1



2

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- Professional Flourishing
- Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse

Trauma Therapist

- Work with abuse survivors

Survivor

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3

What we will cover

- Brief journey through church history (gender and power)
 - “Clericalism” the water in which we swim
- What is adult clergy sexual abuse
 - How it happens
- Ministry-the unregulated profession
- The impact on victims
- Selected highlights from national survey (study in 2015)
 - The church
 - The survivor
 - Policy, Reporting, and Process
- Healing/Best Practices

4

Clement (ca. 150-215) and Tertullian (ca. 160-220)

- Clement of Alexandria*: “Every woman should be filled with shame by the thought that she is a woman.”
- Tertullian*: “Woman is a temple built over a sewer, the gateway to the devil. Woman, you are the devil’s doorway. You led astray one whom the devil would not dare attack directly. It was your fault that the Son of God had to die; you should always go in mourning and rags.”

5

Augustine (354-430) and Pope Gregory I (540-604)

- Augustine*: “Woman was merely man’s helpmate, a function which pertains to her alone. She is not the image of God but as far as man is concerned, he is by himself the image of God.”
- Pope Gregory I*: “Woman is slow in understanding and her unstable and naive mind renders her by way of natural weakness to the necessity of a strong hand in her husband. Her ‘use’ is two fold: animal sex and motherhood.”

6

Aquinas (1225-74)

- “Such is the subjection in which woman is by nature subordinate to man, because the power of rational discernment is by nature stronger in man.”

7

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

- “Women should stay at home, keep house and bear children. If a woman dies from childbearing, let her die. That is all she is here for.”
- “God’s work and Word stare us in the face, declaring that women must be used either for marriage or for fornication”

8

John Knox (1513-72)

- “To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion, or empire above any realm, nation, or city, is repugnant to nature; contumely [*an insult*] to God, a thing most contrary to his revealed will and approved ordinance; and finally, it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice.”
- “Nature, I say, does paint them[women]forth to be weak, frail, impatient, feeble, and foolish; and experience has declared them to be inconstant, variable, cruel, lacking the spirit of counsel and leadership....”

9

Gendered Dualism/Opposition

Mind-Body Dualism → Male-Female Opposition

MEN : WOMEN

Mind : Body
Reason : Emotion
Thought : Feeling
Strong : Weak
Active : Passive
Aggressive : Submissive
Autonomy : Dependence
Self-interest : Selflessness

10

Clericalism

- Elevation and prioritization of leaders’ message, goals, and ideas to the exclusion of congregants and their goals, wishes, and priorities.
- Leaders benefit from this arrangement by using their added power in ways that benefit them.
- Congregants are not socialized to believe that dissent, pushback, and holding people accountable are acceptable.

11

Clericalism

- Narcissists and predators can feed off of environments in which clericalism flourishes. They are freer to manipulate, steer and control narratives, and get overwhelming congregational support in the face of any information that suggests harm has occurred by them or on their watch.
- Congregants are less likely to trust their own instincts, do something to rock the boat, and often carry shame of the institution or perpetrator.

12

Clericalism

- When clericalism is operating without any criticism or critique, abuse and exploitation are more likely to happen.
- Churches are the safest institution for predators and abusers, and they often seek them out because it is so easy to remain undetected and undeterred
- Some predators are very gifted and seek out leadership jobs. Friberg and Laaser (1999) talk about “ordination as a shame reduction technique”. They are gifted, intelligent, and abusive. **We need to acknowledge these can go together.**

13

History and context

- Because of the current patriarchal structure of religious institutions, most religious leaders are heterosexual men and most victims are women.
- Adult clergy sexual abuse is primarily female victimization by males with authority/power.
- **History demonstrates the gendered religious views of men and women.

**Special thanks to Lenoire Wright, Baylor University, for the previous slides with quotes

14

Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse

(Oxford, 2012; Pooler & Frey, 2017; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022)

- Use power, position, role, to exploit and sexually abuse a **vulnerable** adult (clericalism makes this easier)
- Consent is not possible when a power differential is present
- Perpetrator uses scripture, spiritual admonitions, spiritual authority, touch (e.g. prolonged hugs) to blur and break down boundaries (takes months, sometimes years)
- Perpetrator keeps victim under his control (sometimes for years)
- The person with more power is **always** the one responsible for maintaining boundaries
- This research is not about being anti-male or anti-religion. It is about challenging the misuse and abuse of power in leaders and congregations.

15

Research on ACSA

(Crisp, 2010, Flynn, 2003; Grenz & Bell, 2001; Steinke, 2006)

- How it happens
- Prevention
- Perpetrator tactics
- Survivor stories
- Systems and context
- **Focus of my research:**
 - **Trauma sensitive response policies**
 - **Best practices to respond to survivors**
 - **Making congregations safer**
 - **Resilience and coping**

16

What is the status quo

- 2.1% of women have experienced a sexual advance from a church leader in their congregation
- 3.1% of **regular church attenders** or 7 women in the average size congregation of 400 have experienced a sexual advance by a church leader since they were 18 (Chaves & Garland, 2009)
 - Ranges from sexual harassment to rape
- How it happens (Garland & Argueta, 2010)
 - Culture of niceness (fear of upsetting the authority figure)
 - People ignoring/overriding their intuition
 - Assumption that leader is not capable of harming someone
 - Access to hidden communication
 - phone/email/social media

17

Clergy

- Are not regulated in any way at a state or federal level
- Ordination (differs by denomination)
 - different processes
 - different requirements
- Education (differs by denomination)
 - No educational requirements to Master of Divinity or Doctor of Ministry
 - boundary training?
 - ethics training?
 - Use of power?
- Responses to misconduct vary widely by denomination

18

Clergy and power

- Power is neither good nor bad
- Power can be used to:
 - Welcome the powerless, excluded, or wounded
 - Protect the powerless
 - Advocate for those in most need
- Who is vulnerable to abuse?
 - People who struggle with boundaries
 - People with deep unmet needs to feel important/special
 - People who have experienced violence/abuse/neglect
 - Anyone who “trusts” a pastor or leader

19

Religious Institutions prioritize

(on a continuum)

Image/Perception vs Substance
 Depth vs Superficiality
 Pain/suffering vs escape/avoidance/numbing
 Reputation vs Reality
 Powerful vs Powerless
 Dishonesty vs Truth
 Authority in One vs Shared Power

20

Congregations (Brown, 2018, p. 135)

- “When the culture of . . . a church . . . mandates that it is more important to protect the reputation of that system and those in power than it is to protect the basic human dignity of individuals. . . You can be certain”:
- Shame is systemic
- Money and power are more important than ethics
- Accountability does not exist
- Control and fear are management tools
- There is a trail of devastation and pain

21

Impact on Victims

Layers of Abuse

1. The Abuse (betrayal of trust)
2. Congregational level betrayal (not believed, blamed, marginalized, pushed out)
 - Poor denominational response
3. Not understood by professionals (professional invalidation)

22

Exploring the layers in depth

- Consent
- Power
- Grooming
- Intermittent Reinforcement
- Betrayal Trauma
- Betrayal Bonding
- Institutional Betrayal
- PTSD

23

Consent and Power

The power differential between a therapist and a client makes it impossible for the client to provide consent to engage in sexual activity; the person with more power is always responsible for setting and maintaining boundaries that allow everyone to be safe

Because of clericalism, the person with religious authority can use the power differential between them and amplify it to control the victim

While clericalism does exist everywhere, the amplified power differences are normalized and find a special and cozy home in Evangelicalism and the Catholic church in particular

24

Grooming

Behaviors used by an abuser to blur and breakdown any boundaries that would keep them from having sexual access to a person who they targeted.

The abuser uses religious language, religious principles, and ideas familiar to the targeted person to convince them not trust their own instincts and intuitions, but rather trust the authority figure alone "you are important to me and my ministry"

Abusers are very patient and will take as much time as they need to erode boundaries and defenses. This could be as much as a year or more in some cases

25

Grooming

Perpetrators identify a core basic human need in their target: belonging, validation, importance, connection, or feeling special, among other things

The perpetrator continues to test and blur personal and sexual boundaries until they can "take" from their targeted person "at will"

The end goal is control: and many sexual abusers begin to bully, physically intimidate, and verbally abuse the person targeted to ensure they remain in control

26

Intermittent Reinforcement

(Senn, Eliasziw, & Barata, 2015; Skinner, 1953)

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    graph TD
      A["The delivery of reward (e.g. love bombs) at irregular intervals keep a person engaged and working harder for longer"] --> B["Narcissists use this type of reward with people they want to control"]
      B --> C["This results in the victim tolerating higher levels of stress and inappropriate behavior for longer"]
      C --> D["This can help explain the concern of 'how can they stay'?" ]
    
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27

Betrayal Trauma (Freyd, 2020)




Betrayal trauma occurs when the people on which a person depends for survival significantly violate that person's trust or wellbeing.

Betrayal trauma almost always results in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (avoidance and numbing primary symptoms).

Betrayal blindness: when people who have been betrayed exhibit lack of awareness, not knowing, and forgetting. In addition to victims, bystanders may also exhibit this trait.

28

Betrayal Bonding (Carnes, 2019)

-  A strong attachment to someone who is hurting us and destructive for us
-  The victim becomes consumed with the betrayer to try to make them less abusive or hurtful
-  The victim often lacks the ability to stop interacting with the betrayer

29

Institutional Betrayal (IB) (Freyd & Birrell, 2013)

Institutional Betrayal refers to **wrongdoing** perpetrated by an institution on which someone depends by failing to prevent or respond supportively to **wrongdoing** by a leader/authority in their midst

To reduce their own cognitive dissonance and to protect the institution on which they themselves depend, bystanders often align with the perpetrator and blame the victim

Survivors report that poor responses from churches were even more hurtful than the actual abuse. The higher the IB, the more difficulty survivors have with building future relationships (Woolston, 2023)

DARVO
(Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender)

30

PTSD (Moncrief-Stuart & Pooler, under review)

- 100% of respondents had PTSD symptoms
- 39% of respondents screened positive for PTSD using the PCL (PTSD Symptom Checklist-Specific)
- After 7 years post abuse, the PCL score was still in the clinically significant range

31

Institutional Betrayal (Moncrief-Stuart & Pooler, under review)

- Most people in the congregation ignored me after the abuse (agreed=+PTSD)
- My church had a policy to guide me (disagreed=+PTSD)
- I felt supported by someone in the congregation after I made the abuse known (disagreed=+PTSD)

32

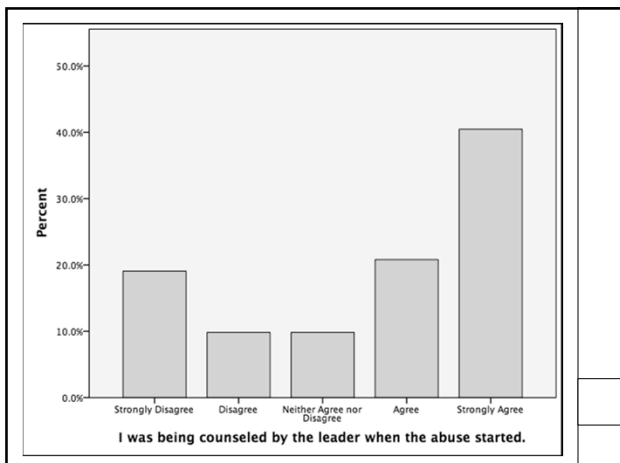
Criminality?

- 13 States have statutes that make it illegal for a pastor to be sexual with someone with whom they have a fiduciary relationship
- Most states require the context of counseling, but some states including Texas have a broader view and clarify that it can happen in any context the pastor is in his role (Renzetti & Yocum, 2013)
- 40% of the time sexual abuse occurs outside of a formal counseling relationship (spiritual advisement, discipleship, friendship)

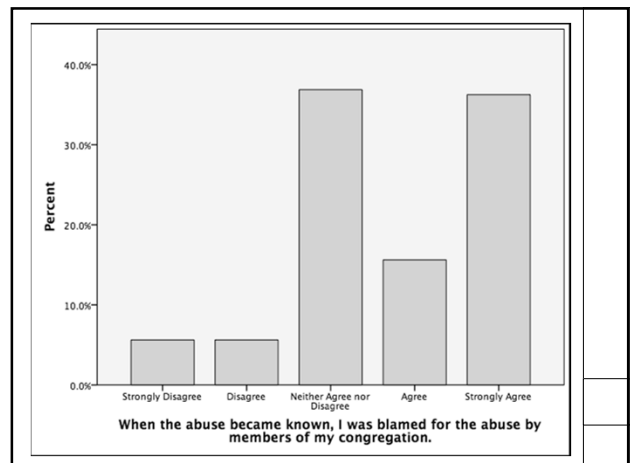
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The Church

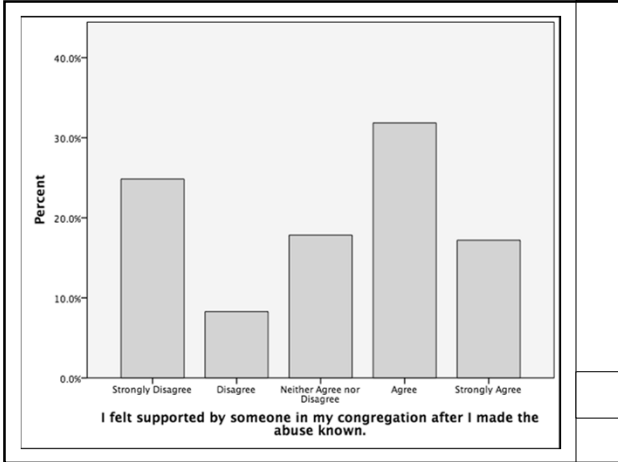
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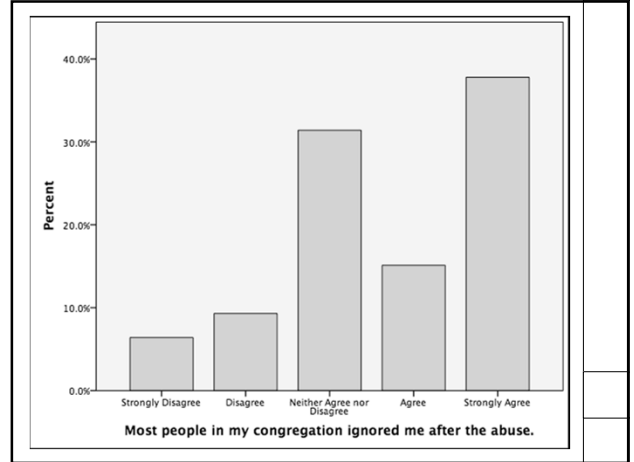
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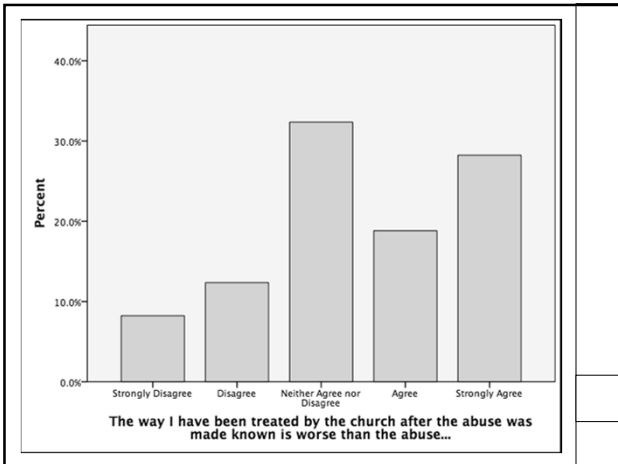
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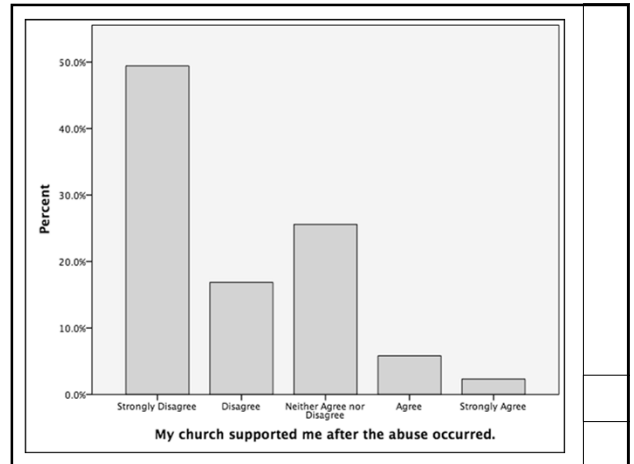
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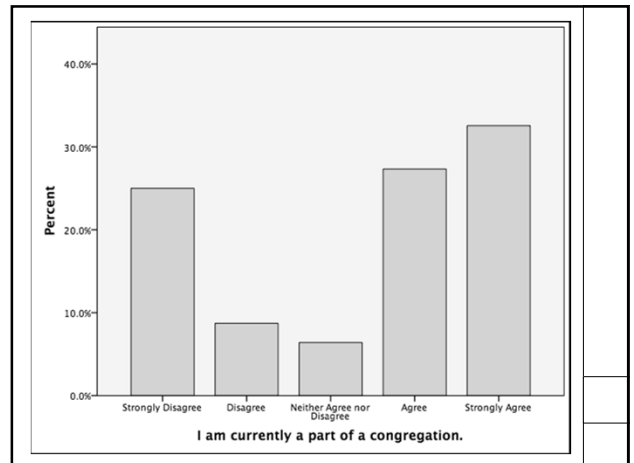
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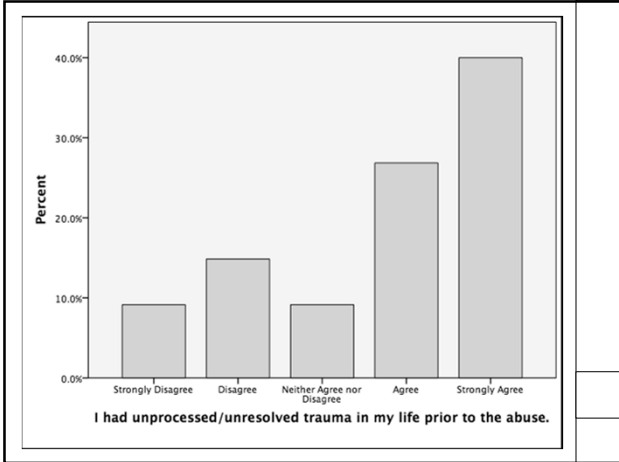
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The Survivor

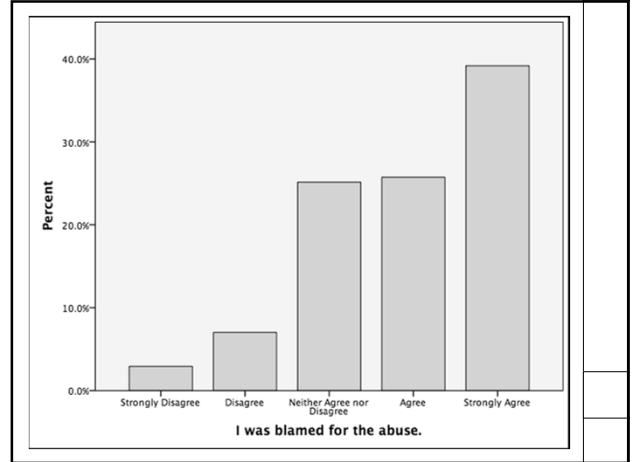
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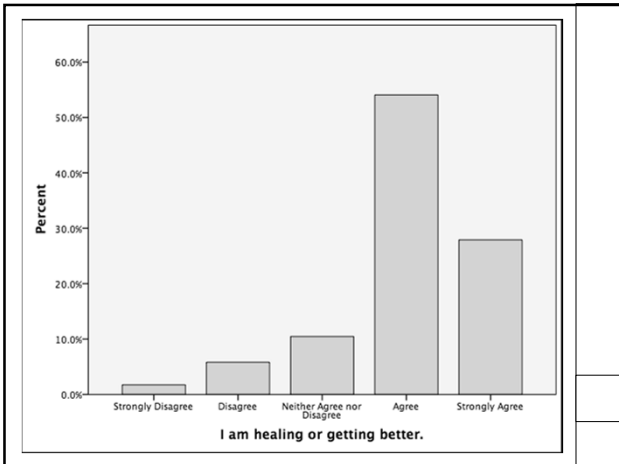
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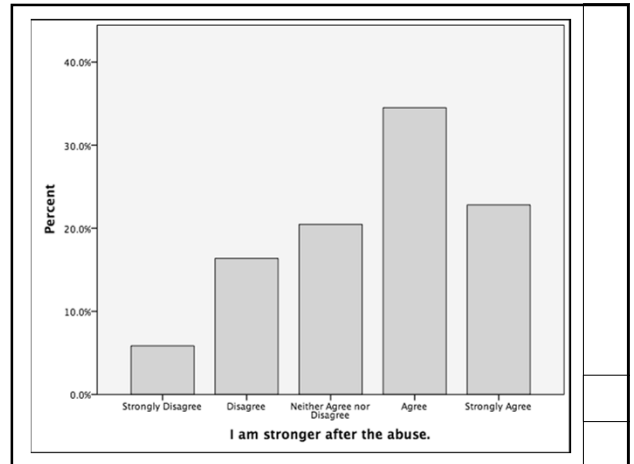
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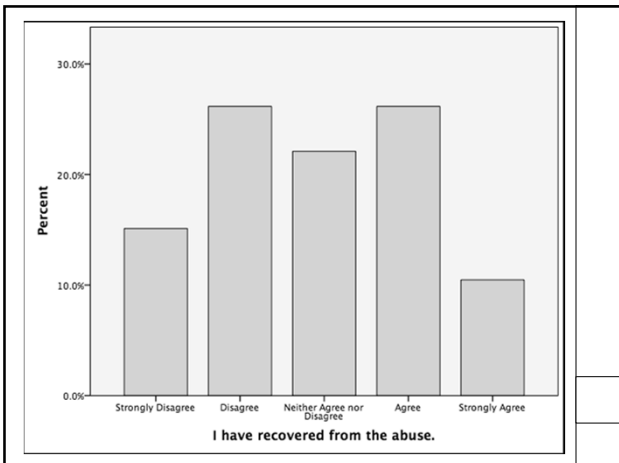
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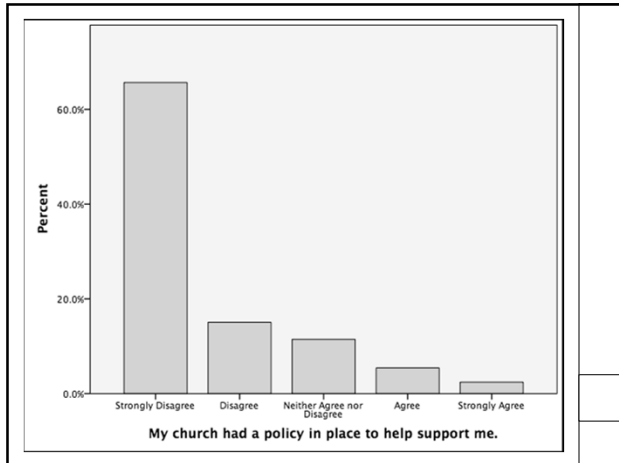
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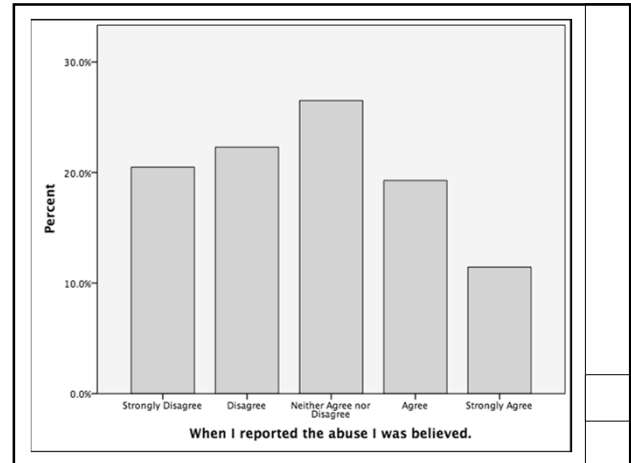
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Policy, Reporting, and Process

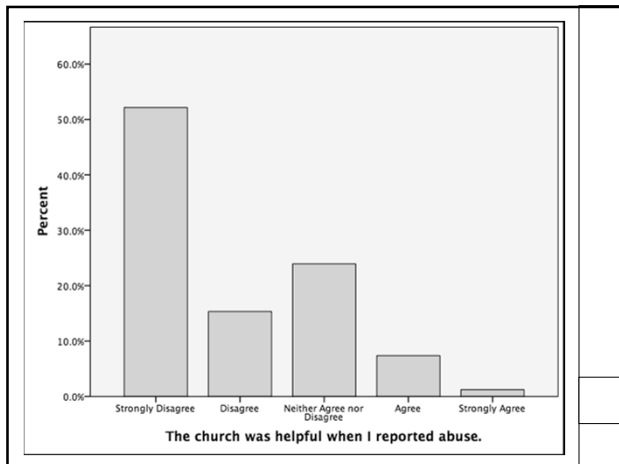
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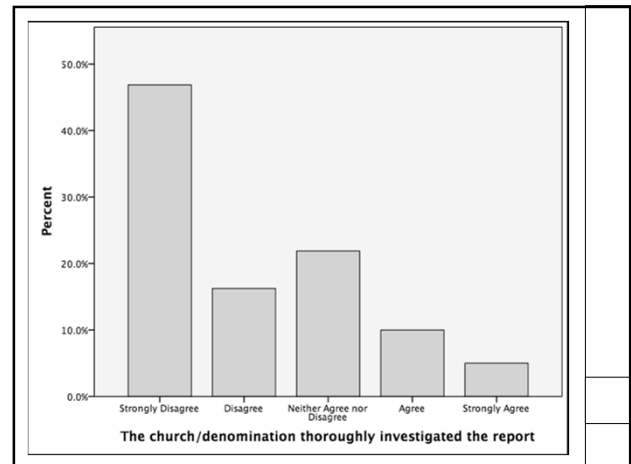
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50



51



52

Paths of healing for Survivors

1. Working through betrayal trauma
2. Working through moral injury
3. Grief/Protest
4. Acceptance
5. Making meaning
6. Post traumatic growth
 - a) Boundaries
 - b) Joy
 - c) Mental health improvement
 - d) Healthy community
7. Manage triggers/flashbacks

53

Best Practices

- Believe and Validate
- Frame as **abuse of power, role, position**
- Call it abuse, it is not an affair (it is not consensual)
- Not a one-time event (average of four years)
- Acknowledge the multiple layers of trauma
 - Abuse by leader
 - Victim tells truth (not believed by relevant others)
 - Blamed by perpetrator and bystanders
 - Congregational marginalization and exclusion
 - Spiritual wounding/disruption of community
 - Professional labels it an affair
- Reporting; legal system; testifying
- Gender based assumptions have no role in investigations
 - Adjudicate based on facts (we are anti-clergy sexual abuse, not anti-male)

54

Resources

Independent External Investigation and Prevention Curricula
 GRACE (safeguarding initiative) <https://www.netgrace.org/>

Supporting Survivors

- Into Account <https://intoaccount.org/>
- FaithTrust Institute www.faitrustinstitute.org
- Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests [SNAP]; www.snapnetwork.org
- AWAKE <https://www.awakecommunity.org/>
- Restored Voice Collective (RVC) <https://www.restoredvoicescollective.com/>

Research:
 4 part annotated bibliography that is regularly updated (38th revision April 2022). <https://www.faitrustinstitute.org/resources/bibliographies/clergy-sexual-abuse>

55

Specifics

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You Tube video:
https://youtu.be/kSK9HUo_CRQ?si=Xwogha5qVOzUGyor

Podcast Interviews:

- CXMH: Sexual Abuse by Faith Leaders (ft. Dr. David Pooler), Episode 54, Oct. 29, 2018
- Safe to Hope: Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse- Expert Contributor, Dr. David Pooler, Season 1: Episode 4, Feb. 21, 2023
- The Incurrable Pests: Behind the Pulpit-Interview with Professor David Pooler, May 1, 2023
- The Roys Report Podcast: Is Misty Edwards a Victim, (ft. Dr. David Pooler), March 13, 2024

56

Questions

Thank you!

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57

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59