

Unlocking the Barnyard Door Years after the Horse was Stolen: How to Pastor to Adult Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivors

Introduction

With the alarming statistic that one in three girls and at least one in six boys will be victims of sexual abuse before their eighteenth birthday¹, it is a safe assumption that our congregations will, at the very least, mirror the survivor statistics. The nature of the church places it in a paradoxical position in the area of sexual abuse. As the Christian tradition believes, the table is open to all who believe congregations intentionally or not tends to both perpetrators and survivors. While both populations require pastoral care, affirmation of being a beloved child of God and a sense of belongingness, this paper will focus on how to pastor to adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

As the current culture within the United States does not encourage honest discussions surrounding sex, sexuality and sexual violence, survivors often live in a shroud of secrecy and shame. With the statistical numbers reaching an incomprehensible level, the church needs to examine how to pastor to both the survivor in a manner that promotes recovery as well as honors the difficulty of surviving the abuse. For example, eighty percent of female victims of childhood sexual abuse experience sexual re-victimization during adulthood.² The answer is not as simplistic as naming the issue from either pulpit or is the expectation that the church becomes an expert on recovery from sexual trauma and abuse. Instead, the church needs to begin to examine the issue from a place to promoted education and healing for the congregation. Through a

¹ Kornfeld, Margaret. *Cultivating Wholeness*. Continuum Publishing: New York, 1998, page 266. Referenced to the Giarretto Institute.

² Crosson-Tower, Cynthia. *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect, 6th Ed.* Allyn and Bacon: Boston, 2005, page 389.

combination of small group ministry, worship services and adult education, the church can develop the framework that will enable members of the congregation to reclaim self-worth and decrease the pandemic cycle of shame found in victims of sexual trauma.

Historically, the church has mirrored society in assisting individuals with recovery from sexual trauma. Pastors are often ill equipped and untrained on how to work with a parishioner after a presents us with a story of a recent traumatic event. Well-intended authors write statements that at best can be considered offensive, at worse, dismissive to the healing process that a victim must undergo in order to transform to a survivor. For example, Marie Fortune writes in *Sexual Violence* that:

*A young woman was raped at the age of eighteen. A religious person, she reflected upon her rape experience in light of her faith. And, as she recovered, she observed that her prayer life had shifted dramatically since the assault. Prior to the rape, she recalled that her prayers most often took the form of “Dear God, please take care of me.” As she recovered from the rape, she realized that now her prayers began, “Dear God, please help me remember what I have learned.”*³

Fortune continues to discuss the woman’s previous relationship with God as immature but the shift in the prayer language indicates a more “mature, assertive relationship with God.”⁴ I find the causation drawn by Fortune to be dangerous at best. An individual who is struggling with either faith or the “how” question regarding sexual violence may find statements like Fortunes reminiscent of the punitive God more closely associated with the Hebrew Bible. I understand that Fortune is drawing upon one individual’s experience:

³ Fortune, Marie. *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*. The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2005, page 144.

⁴ Fortune, Marie. Page 144.

her example makes me nervous that a traumatic event appears to be internalized as what allowed the survivor to develop a mature faith practice.⁵

Small Group Ministry

Small group ministry provides a deeper level of connection for church members. Christians are called into a wider community of believers. However, often a smaller group needs to be established to meet the needs of the congregation. As Paul Moots states in *Becoming Barnabas*, the church needs “to establish ministries in response to congregational and community needs.”⁶ While I disagree with much of Moots’ exegetical work, I do agree with the need for congregations to develop specific targeted ministries as acts of congregational self-care. Moots writes from the perspective of a United Methodist where the nature of the church polity encourages an empowered laity.⁷ The key to developing an effective small group ministry centers on the pastor acting like Barnabas when he let go of his lead thus allowing Paul’s leadership to flourish.⁸ For an ordained minister to effectively pastor to a congregation, s/he must be willing to allow all of the members to pastor to each other and acknowledge that the pastor may not be the best individual to lead a project or group.

⁵ I will freely admit to this being a personal bias. I wonder based on my own trauma history about individuals who point to traumatic events as bringing them closer to God. I would be reticent to use this as an example because I feel that it might be as easily turned into a punitive interpretation of a violent event. While survival from a traumatic event provides a lesson and the change in prayer can be used as a point of empowerment, I really struggle with the word ‘mature’ used in this context.

⁶ Moots, Paul. *Becoming Barnabas: The Ministry of Encouragement*. The Alban Institute: Herndon, Virginia, 2004, page 26.

⁷ As Methodist pastors traditionally itinerate every two – four years (depending on the conference), the church members tend to develop a stronger sense of self regarding in terms of developing programs and activities for the church. The itineration system allows members to have a higher degree of participation as well as lessens the risk of “doing church by wrote” which can be present in long-term pastorates found often within other denominations.

⁸ Moots, Paul. Page 29.

I suggest utilizing small group ministry as a means to assist adult survivors. I recommend that the group establish as a covenanted small group allowing new members at certain points during the year. Limiting the fluidity of the membership allows group members to decrease individual levels of mistrust and shame. In allowing new members to begin at set points through the year, individuals create a safe environment to welcome newcomers and assist fellow survivors on the journey. Additionally, new members can aid in the healing process of older members in addition to decreasing the risk of the enmeshment of the group.

Standard group protocol rules should apply regarding how many meetings an individual may miss before s/he is requested to leave the group, no visitors allowed and the group *must* be confidential. Prior to group formation, I would endeavor to have a trained lay professional with the group to ensure the emotional safety of all participants. I would not encourage this to become a process group or as a substitution for professional services. The purpose would be a ministry that allows fellow survivors to connect within the safety of the church to discuss issues that might be problematic during services, concerns of over practices within the congregation and to discuss coping skills that individual survivors may have found helpful during triggering times. I would suggest that the group limit the level of sharing of personal history focusing instead on working on developing a group that seeks to facilitate the adaptation of coping skills. I would insist that group members be provided with the names of local therapists in order to prevent the group from being an ‘unmonitored’ group therapy session. As the culture we live in is highly mobile, a small group such as this would provide members with a

support network during times of crisis that otherwise might have previously delegated to the role of the family.⁹

An effective small group ministry to survivors allows individuals to work through the grieving process necessary to heal from sexual violence within the context of the chosen faith community. My personal bias is that we (the wider church) do not allow members to be angry with God. If the church is to be a healing community, we need to work with the grief patterns outlined by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross to recover from trauma. I strongly agree with Fortune when she writes about the necessity to affirm anger but not to let the anger reside at harmful level.¹⁰ The small group ministry can provide the net of safety that will allow members to express anger, rage both towards God and others and help facilitate reconciliation with God, self and perhaps others.

During the establishment phase of the small group, I would encourage the pastor gently let it become known that s/he is a safe person to discuss survivor issues. While I suggest that the pastor refer individuals to a trained therapist, I believe that the pastor should place members of the congregation in contact with one another.¹¹ Not only does this lessen the role of the pastor as “everything”, it creates a role for empowerment for the survivor. Moots describes the “outcast” as “any person or group of people who bring such discomfort to you or your congregation that you resist calling them in your ministry.”¹² Sexual abuse survivors are often viewed as outcasts; very few congregations are willing to discuss the long-term ramifications and wounding caused by sexual

⁹ For example, a pastor receives a call after the daughter is sexually assaulted. The pastor learns at that point the mother had been sexually abused by her father. If such a small group was to be present in the church, the pastor could then refer the mother to the small group to help facilitate her healing: the mother knows what the daughter is facing and other group members will be able to hold her in prayer and help her journey with her daughter during the difficult days and months to follow.

¹⁰ Fortune, Marie. Pages 153-154.

¹¹ Of course, this would be with the permission of both individuals.

¹² Moots, Paul. Page 50.

violence. By forming a point of connection between congregants, the church lessens the shame that many survivors feel. Additionally, as an individual becomes more comfortable with the role of a survivor, they may become willing to speak testimonies to how faith helped to heal the scars of childhood abuse. Kornfeld reminds us “that God has given us communities where through our relationships with each other, we can be healed, loved and supported.”¹³ By creating an effective small group ministry, the church can help individuals with the continuing healing process.

Worship

As a survivor, I struggle with worship. Currently, worship resolves itself to proclaim the “Good News” and not provide individuals with a protracted ability to wrestle with the difficult traditions of the faith. Additionally, worship is a time of forced space intrusion. I am uncomfortable with the crossing of personal space boundaries during the passing of the peace. In some churches, there is a presumed assumption that hugging is acceptable and appreciated by all members of the congregation.¹⁴ The pastorate needs education on how to create a safe and welcoming environment. During a conversation with a local pastor whose congregation tends to hug without asking, I asked him why this practice was encouraged towards visitors. He appeared perplexed and possibly offended at my question. I explained that for survivors of sexual abuse and trauma being approached by strangers may prove to be very traumatic and become a lasting impression of the church. He told me the congregation did this as a way of welcoming individuals into worship.

¹³ Kornfeld, Margaret. Page 275.

¹⁴ Personally, I have stopped attending worship services at ANTS as well as a few local churches over this very issue.

Often, we discuss the idea of naming sexual shame from the pulpit. I believe that in order to do so, the local pastor must be prepared to provide follow-up pastoral care for congregants. Naming items from the pulpit in subtle manner indicates the pastor is a safe individual to engage in a conversation surrounding sensitive issues. For example, in preaching the familiar text of the woman at the well (John 4:1-42), I illustrated the element of shame present with the woman walking out to the well in the middle of the day. I provided a listing of modern examples that might cause an individual shame (divorce, AIDS, being abused) but how shame is an internal reaction to the expectation of society NOT an emotion ascribed as necessary or beneficial by God. By reducing shame, the pastorate can help to promote an individual's self-esteem, the healing process and affirm an individuals worth as a child of God.

While my sermon illustration provided a specific opportunity for a healing event, Kornfeld reminds clergy that even if the opportunity is not provided during the context of the liturgy, the formation of a safe space may allow congregants to begin their healing process. As worship is often the only time, an individual engages within the church community, the creation of a safe space through prayers, sermons and ritual may establish the local congregation as a safe space for an individual. Ministers must remember that congregants often hear what we do not say: that an innocent statement may prove to be the catalyst for an individual to seek out help.

Worship is critical for survivors. When I first began to examine my sexual abuse history, the one place I felt safe was in the sanctuary of my church. The sanctuary is one of few places that I will actually sit in the middle of a pew, in the middle of the

congregation: the pastoral staff and parishioners created a safe space through an authentic presence.

Adult Education

While small group ministry and worship opportunities are critical in assisting adult survivors heal from childhood sexual abuse, a crucial component of developing a community that seeks to understand and advocates for survivors of sexual violence is the development of an effective adult education curriculum that allows individuals to understand sheer enormity of the situation. During the introduction of this paper, I quoted Margaret Kornfeld's statistics on sexual violence. The numbers alone make the problem of sexual abuse to appear to be insurmountable. This is why the role of sexuality must be discussed publicly and affirmatively.

In viewing sexuality as a gift from God, sexual violence must be named as an evil. Sexual violence runs the risk of removing an individual's ability to nurture one's self in a healthy, positive manner. Patrick Carnes states:

The fundamental building block of healthy sexuality is the ability to be nurtured, to feel comfortable with being nurtured, to give ourselves over to being nurtured. If we can't do this, it will never be possible as an adult, to have healthy sex.¹⁵

Healthy sexuality represents mutuality and respect. In working through education forums, by discussing overtly the necessity of intimacy for human beings, the church can help to educate secondary survivors as to potential area of struggles by survivors.

Within the context of childhood sexual abuse, many survivors learn to mistake a grooming pattern of a predator for positive nurturing. The perpetrator treats his/her

¹⁵ Carnes, Patrick. *Sexual Anorexia: Overcoming Sexual Self-Hatred*. Hazelden: Center City, Minnesota, 1997, page 119.

victim as special, apart from others. Nurturing is an act that allows for creativity and exploration in a mutually safe environment: be in on the playground as a child or in the bedroom as an adult. Nurturing is difficult for adult survivors. Nurturing skills often must be learned for the first time. In creating an adult forum around healthy sexuality using Carnes' table of healthy sexuality,¹⁶ the church can promote the healing process for survivors while providing a service to the wider congregation.

Childhood sexual abuse runs the risk of removing an individual from the ability to engage in healthy sexuality. Carnes' discusses the idea of both sexuality and spirituality holding commonality in the search the larger meaning of life. Carnes' quotes M. Scott Peck in saying "I distrust any religious conversation which does not also involve an intensification of one's sexuality."¹⁷ Until congregations discuss healthy sexuality as an opportunity for intersection with the Divine or at the very least a gift given by God, sexuality will remain an area that causes shame for many parishioners.

Adult education forums provide leaders of the church an opportunity to empower laity in helping to educate the congregation. For example, in serving a congregation that wanted to examine the long-term implications of childhood sexual abuse, I may ask a criminal court judge to present the ramifications in the legal system, a therapist to discuss the difficulties in emotional development and a pastor in the congregation to discuss the spiritual difficulties for secondary survivors. By having multiple individuals speak to the ramifications of sexual violence, the shame of victimization (both primary and secondary) is reduced and the church continues to promote both healing and education for the members.

¹⁶ Carnes, Patrick. Page 123. I would only use the healthy sexuality side of the page, as this focus on this discussion would not be on sexually addictive behaviors, which is found on the left-hand side of the page.

¹⁷ Carnes, Patrick. Page 337.

A critical piece in developing the adult education curriculum is to minister to the secondary survivors. With the staggering numbers of survivors, there is an equal number of secondary survivors who will also be served by the education process. For example, a secondary survivor potentially can learn of community resources, techniques for promoting nurturing and a greater level of understanding of trauma. By acknowledging secondary survivors, the church works towards decreasing the level of systemic shame that is so often the fall out of childhood sexual abuse.

In addition to developing adult forums, pastors should ensure add to the church library books that discuss sexuality, sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse. By having resources readily available, the pastor further indicates his/her willingness to discuss issues. A final suggestion would be to set up a book discussion group that would include texts that discuss sexuality and sexual abuse. By having a fictional account as a point of discussion survivors, secondary survivors and others, members would be able to reflect authentically based on reading a common text.¹⁸

Conclusion

Recovery from childhood sexual abuse is difficult. Individuals often begin to process of recovery in adulthood. Abuse during childhood robs the individual of the ability to create trust with others and engage in true nurturing behaviors. Although the experience of sexual abuse can never be normalized, the sheer numbers of survivors demonstrate that many within our congregations will have experienced some form of sexual abuse prior to the age of eighteen. Our congregants experienced the trauma, as

¹⁸ A second option would be to have this as a film series with a potluck/film/discussion format that might attract a different segment of the congregation.

clergy we must reach out to be a voice for healing. The church must not seek to be a substitute for individual or couples therapy. In the promotion of small group ministry, the church can help lessen the internalized shame of “nobody here knows what I am going through” or “they (the congregation) really do not understand”. By setting intentional parameters, the church can create a small group which where members can assist each other during times of need.¹⁹

In creating a safe worship space, a pastor can let it be known that s/he respects the needs of all congregants. Additionally, by subtly naming areas of potential shame, the pastor indicates that s/he is a person that is willing to discuss areas of sexuality and trauma. Finally, in encouraging the church to establish adult forums that address areas of sexuality, the church provides an open forum for communication on sensitive subjects. As a congregation is able to undertake such a task in a healthy, respectful manner, the church will create a community that is truly welcoming to all members.

¹⁹ For example, the Angel of the Lord letting Mary know she is pregnant disturbs me. I learned fairly recently that another friend (also in seminary) who is a survivor has problems with the story. The group provides a place to name areas of concern within the liturgical season.

Bibliography

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