

Today is a day that for most of my life, I could never have imagined happening - a day that I can publicly break my silence and use my voice about the trauma I suffered as a teenager. For 42 years, this trauma has followed me throughout my life and into my family's life. This is a statement of sadness but also a call for action. It is a statement that no one should ever have to write. It is a statement of what happened to me at the hands of a minister, an authority figure, and a family friend. Unfortunately, through this process, I have learned that abuse by a minister is a very common problem in all denominations across the world. It is a crisis. By writing this, I hope to educate, answer questions that have been voiced, and bring this darkness to light that happens to so many. I pray that those who read this will have an open mind as they read it, become aware, and understand how this happens and what to do when it does.

## WHY DIDN'T I REPORT MY ABUSE WHEN IT HAPPENED TO ME?

My abuse started with grooming at the age of 12. Grooming is when someone builds a relationship, trust, and emotional connection with a young person so they can manipulate, exploit, and abuse them. The door to the grooming process was opened when I went to David, my youth minister, with questions about my salvation. I had doubts about a profession of faith I'd made when I was younger. It was during this time of searching that we began to spend a lot of time together. I opened up to him about personal doubts and spiritual questions and he used my questions about salvation as an opportunity to draw me closer. Being certain of my salvation was very important to me, and I trusted him because of his role and position of authority in the church. During these years, he started to confide in me as a friend. He told me about his unhappiness and marriage problems. It was an act of manipulation that made me feel sorry for him but important to him as well.

By the age of 15, the grooming process had accomplished its purpose of building trust and dependence upon him. That is when the sexual abuse began, starting with him sharing his feelings for me in a very bold way in his office at the church. The sexual abuse went on for 4 years and did not end until right before I graduated from high school when David broke it off and stepped out of the ministry. Throughout the entire abuse, David had made me feel special by giving me gifts, notes, and promises of a future life together. He constantly told me that he loved me and was going to marry me. I believed everything he said because I trusted him as a spiritual leader. David was 16 years older than me, my youth pastor, and married with 3 kids. I was too young to understand the grooming and manipulation, especially since it had started so young. I took the guilt and shame on myself and wrongly condemned myself for having "an affair".

My freshman year in college, I fell into a deep depression and began drinking heavily to self-medicate. At the end of my freshman year, with strong, but misplaced feelings of guilt and shame, I had a meeting with our lead pastor to confess all that had happened. All the pastor said was that he was sorry it happened. I was NOT told that it was abuse nor that it wasn't my fault or even advised to get counseling. The pastor said that because David had left the ministry, he couldn't do anything. That was the day that I decided I was going to take my secret to the grave. Broadmoor had been a part of my family's life going back to my grandparents. I loved my church and considered the people there as family. Along with my love for the church, I cared deeply about David's family. News of his actions would be devastating to his family and Broadmoor. I felt it was my job to protect everyone. There were times early on when I wondered if I should share the secret that was eating me alive, but I worried that if I told

anyone, David would go to prison and his children would not have a father. I could not be responsible for their dad being taken away from them.

Another factor that played a big part in this decision to not tell anyone is something called trauma bonding. I had developed a trauma bond with David that caused me to continue allowing him to remain a part of my and my family's life. Trauma bonds are created when a person who is or has been abused is manipulated into feeling a connection to their abuser. It is similar to Stockholm Syndrome in which a victim develops feelings of trust or affection toward a captor in a kidnapping or hostage taking situation. Trauma bonds are quite common in abuse situations and are one of the most challenging things to deal with because of the many complicated and mixed feelings they bring up. This bond can cause the victim to minimize the abuse or treat the offender as if the abuse had never occurred. It can even lead the victim to act as if the offender is a friend. My trauma bond carried over into adulthood and influenced me to make decisions that I regret. The depth of my guilt and shame and the extent of my trauma bond with him had been so programmed into me that it has taken years of work to understand and break it.

After my initial disclosure to our pastor, I kept my secret for over 25 years except for a few of the very closest people in my life. My husband didn't even know until our children were toddlers. When my daughters reached the age at which my grooming and abuse had started, I began to recognize the abuse for what it was, and it took me to a place of great sorrow and deep depression. For the first time, I recognized how young and naive my girls were and began to truly understand how young and naive I had been when my abuse started. An adult had put me in a position in which I should never have been placed. Imagine any 12 or 13 year-old child in your life having to face such adult issues at such a young age. I could now see what a child I had been just as my girls were now. All those years of burying the trauma I experienced had been damaging to me emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

For the next 15 years I struggled on and off to get out of bed. The abuse affected every part of my and my family's life. Being in such a dark place left me emotionally withdrawn from my family and friends. There were several times that I had to leave home to get extended help at trauma treatment facilities. While the financial assistance David provided covered some expenses, it did not come close to covering the ongoing costs of treatment, and the financial strain it caused is still affecting our family today. In exchange for my protection of the church and David's family, my family suffered greatly. It took years to deal with the emotional baggage of it all. The loss of trust in the church, and most importantly God, was difficult to regain. In the process of seeking salvation, I had been manipulated and abused for someone else's satisfaction and perversion! My salvation, the most important decision of my life, hung in the balance for over 37 years because David placed his personal gratification above my eternal salvation! I still battle with some of the spiritual damage that was caused by this abuse.

#### WHY DID I COME FORWARD NOW?

I didn't come to this decision lightly. I also have not come forward out of vengeance or retribution. I understand and am grateful for those who care about David's family - I care about them too. The truth is that the grief everyone is suffering now, my family's and David's, is a result of David's choice to abuse and manipulate, not my choice to tell the truth about it. The basis of my decision is pure and done to ensure David doesn't use his position of authority as

an opportunity to perpetrate a similar abuse on others. I also feel that this abuse along with his repeated deceit and lack of public remorse disqualifies him from the ministry.

In recent years, the SBC has been in the spotlight for covering up abuse in the church. After a very detailed article about the rampant abuse in our denomination came out, abuse reform was introduced at the Southern Baptist Convention, and the subject became a priority for the SBC. As I read the article, I was overwhelmed to hear about the many cases just like mine. It opened my eyes to the shocking number of victims there are and to the number of cases that were reported but covered up to protect the reputations of people and churches.

Then the day came that I learned that David had returned to the ministry as a lead pastor of a small church. I looked at the church's website with pictures of him and children of all ages. Knowing that there are predators of ALL ages and having experienced abuse personally from him, I knew I had to speak out. I realized that in an effort to protect David and his family, I was not doing all I could to protect other innocent children and their families. I felt like it was my responsibility to protect people that he could harm. The pastor that I had originally told about my relationship with David was now in the highest position in the state for Mississippi Baptists. My husband and I went to him with our concerns and asked him to advise David to step down from ministry forever. The pastor agreed that it needed to happen, and we left his office feeling like the situation would be handled. After months of no news, I reached out to the pastor and was told that he had gotten too busy to talk to him due to his upcoming retirement. It was a huge blow and seemed to leave no other options for David to be removed from ministry.

As I continued with counseling, I followed the abuse reform in the SBC. I continually heard more stories like mine. After much prayer, I decided to move forward with sharing my story with the Broadmoor church leaders. It would have been easier and safer to stay silent, but I felt called to speak out and be an example to others who have stayed silent about their own trauma; many who have continued to suffer their entire lives. I speak out today to do all I can to prevent this from happening to anyone else. I want to educate parents and other leaders to recognize the signs that this could be happening to their children. Educational resources for what to do if abuse happens in the church are now readily available. There are no excuses for lack of action! In order to protect our children, abusers AND the people who cover it up need to be held accountable.

Remember, David was a family friend and minister who had my family's complete trust. Many times, abusers are people others would never suspect. It is our duty to protect the most vulnerable, and I take my calling to help very seriously. By God's grace, I am a survivor. I am no longer controlled by David, and after much prayer, I am willingly answering God's call on my life to be used in this battle however He deems fit. I have already lost friends who know my identity and don't agree with me speaking out. However, the task of helping others find their voice, educating people about this subject, and protecting the vulnerable is far more valuable than what others think about me.

The crisis of abuse is not a subject that anyone wants to be a part of. But, we must open our eyes and acknowledge that perpetrators are hiding in our churches. They are not just scary people you see on the side of the road. They are expert manipulators, they are friends, and authority figures. They want our children. Let's do all we can to stop them.

I want to sincerely thank the leaders at Broadmoor Baptist Church for listening to me, taking action, and pursuing the truth. Broadmoor took this on knowing that it could be detrimental to how people view our church and also the larger Church. Instead of being fearful, they wanted to bring this darkness to the light. I hope that many other churches will follow their lead to step up and address it if their church has a similar crisis.

I want to end this statement by giving thanks to my Heavenly Father. God has shown His love and faithfulness to me in so many ways. He has used people, sermons, words of encouragement, other survivors, hard times and good times to show me that He IS a good God. He has made things happen during this journey that have no explanation other than God. He has been and continues to be Jehovah Rapha to me, my God who heals. I may come under attack by even more people who are in denial and don't even want to understand or be educated. But, I am hopeful that the truth will prevail and others will be strong enough to open their eyes to it. Many times, during this process, I have been fearful. There is a Psalm that has been a favorite of mine for years that I have been leaning heavily on over the last few weeks as I have been awaiting the report.

I am continually praying Psalm 3:3-8 and Philippians 4:4-7.

Psalm 3:3-8

**3** But thou, O Lord, art a shield for me; my glory, and the lifter up of mine head. **4** I cried unto the Lord with my voice, and he heard me out of his holy hill. Selah. **5** I laid me down and slept; I awaked; for the Lord sustained me. **6** I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people, that have set themselves against me round about. **7** Arise, O Lord; save me, O my God: for thou hast smitten all mine enemies upon the cheek bone; thou hast broken the teeth of the ungodly. **8** Salvation belongeth unto the Lord: thy blessing is upon thy people. Selah.

Philippians 4:4-7

**4** Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! **5** Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. **6** Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. **7** And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Continually praying for peace. Thank you for letting me share.