



Spirit Inspired
Worship

Her Story

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Rachel Yates

With deep breaths, sobs, and shaky sips of water, she shared her story with us. In turn, she asked me to share it with you. Her name is Susan, and this is not an easy story to hear. If you're looking for a cute story from me today, set aside my article until you're ready for something weighty.

Susan began her story with the rockiness of her childhood and the home she discovered in her local Presbyterian church as a teenager. The pastor for youth took her under his wing, and Susan was empowered to take on leadership roles in the church. The pastor and his wife also opened their home to Susan, letting her babysit the kids or spend the night when she wanted. For Susan, this was the intact, loving family she craved.

One night, when everyone else was sleeping, the pastor and Susan stayed up later to talk. He began to rub her back, then her hair, then her buttocks, and between her legs. As she stiffened in response, he pulled back. In typical, grooming fashion, he made light of what had happened. He repeatedly told Susan over the next weeks that he did not see her in a sexual way, but then he would repeat the touching. The Presbyterian pastor laid it on this teenage girl to set the boundaries of their relationship, telling her to visit only when his wife was around. When the pastor did not stop his abuse, Susan told another pastor, and the disciplinary process took over. The pastor was placed on administrative leave, the authorities were notified, an Investigative Committee was formed and brought charges, and a Permanent Judicial Commission trial was held. When the case was dismissed on procedural grounds, the Committee on Ministry required the pastor to engage in rehabilitative actions before returning to ministry, which he refused. Eventually, the pastor was released from ordered ministry.

Susan shared her story with a gathering of presbytery leaders, so that we might better understand not only the abuse she suffered at the hands of the pastor, but also the pain caused by our disciplinary process. As a vulnerable teenager, Susan felt she lost the one home that had offered stability: the church. She also feels an ongoing burden of making sure this man does not continue to abuse others. While his potential for abuse as a Presbyterian pastor has been eliminated, she wonders how to eliminate the threat entirely.

This past General Assembly, we built on the protections afforded to victims under our Book of Order. We've approved a rewrite to the Church Discipline section of our constitution, and we've added requirements for boundaries training – not just for ministers, but for church leaders. We do so knowing that sexual predators will not be transformed through a session about boundaries. We do so because it empowers the rest of us to know what to look for, so that we can prevent or catch the abuse.

We firm up or write our sexual misconduct, anti-harassment, and child and youth protection policies not because they make abusers compliant, but because they limit the possibilities in which abuse can happen. Having these policies in place, frequently revisited, and enforced can ward off evildoers who must avoid such controls. Our trainings and our policies let predators know that we're watching. These guardrails will not be infallible, but they help immensely.

Susan's story is not about any minister of Milwaukee Presbytery. The abuse Susan shares in her story is not unique to big or small churches, urban or rural churches, or progressive or conservative churches. We cannot take comfort that her story didn't take place here because, sadly, it happens everywhere. Thank you for taking seriously our intention that the church be a safe place for all of God's children. Give thanks for the courage of every Susan who comes forward. Pray for the church that we might respond compassionately toward these survivors and justly toward their abusers.