

Guide to

CREATING SAFE ENVIRONMENTS

for

SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

in the

CONGREGATION

Produced by the Safe Church program at Safe Communities

with a grant from the LMC Legacy Foundation



WWW.SAFECOMMUNITIESPA.ORG



Safe Communities is a nonprofit specializing in child sexual abuse prevention and response through education and training, trauma-informed support for survivors, and working toward systemic institutional and cultural change to prevent and reduce the long-term adverse impacts of abuse on individuals and communities.

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“
The quotes throughout are from Survivors that Safe Communities has worked with, voicing elements important to their healing.

This Congregational Guide is supported by a generous grant from the LMC Legacy Foundation. Workshops and training to help your congregation become a safe and welcoming place for Survivors, groups and retreats for Survivors, and workshops for parents, children, and teens to learn how to stay safe from sexual abuse are also supported under this grant through October 31, 2021. Please see the Resources section in this Guide, or visit our website to learn more about these programs, most of which are available in virtual formats.

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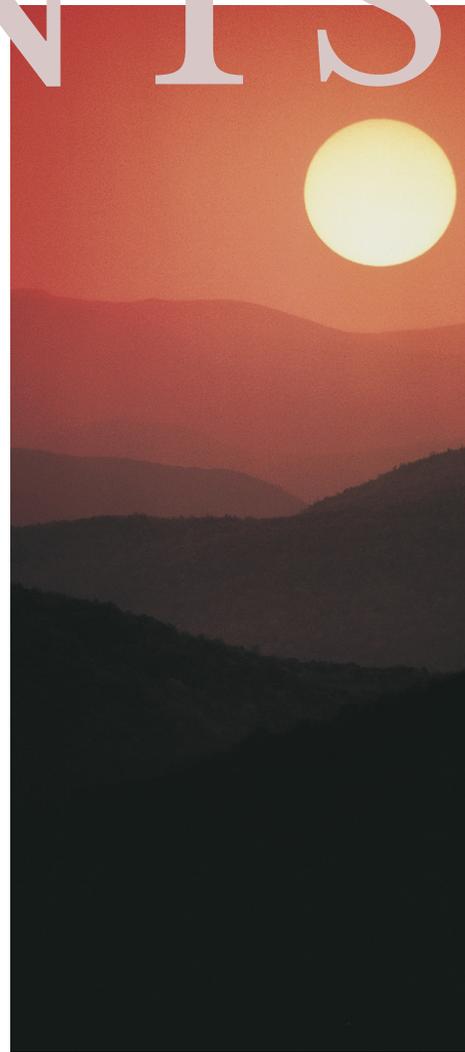
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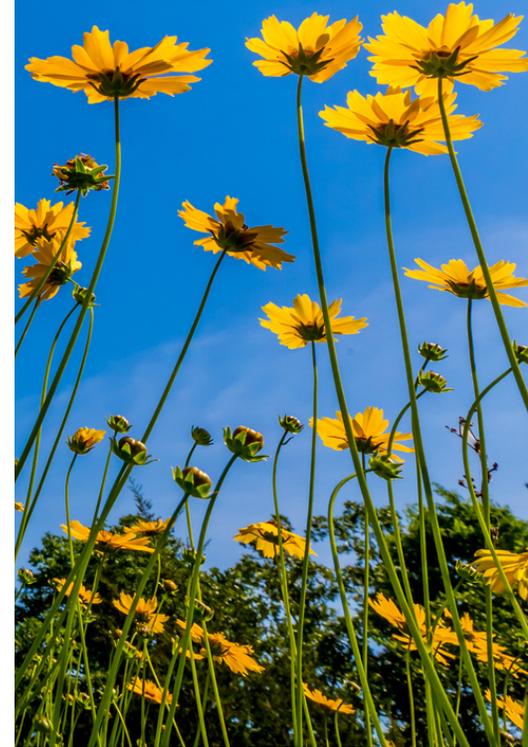
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***Through October 31, 2021
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*Special thanks to Pastor Mark Harris, M.Div.,
for his contributions to this guidebook.*

Introduction

Everyone in the congregation can contribute to creating a safe and sensitive environment for the adults among us who were sexually abused as children.

Although most of us are not equipped to be counselors, all of us can learn how to talk about this issue in a way that offers hope.

Although we may not realize it, Survivors are all around us.

Studies reflect that at least 25% of women, and 20% of men, experienced sexual abuse in childhood. 90% are abused by someone they know and trust in their family, community, or church.

The emotional, relational, spiritual, physical, and other impacts often last for decades. These wounds are mostly invisible.

Because of the social stigma and misplaced shame, many never tell anyone, and if they do, we are often at a loss as to what to say or how to help. We hope this guide will be of service.

“The physical manifestation of keeping this secret is debilitating... crippling.”

Linda Crockett
Founder & Director
Safe Communities



The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Faith

Child Sexual Abuse can be very damaging to one's faith. It can be very hard to continue to believe in a loving God who offers redemption after experiencing a violation of trust so complete as to be sexually abused as a child.

There are some Theological themes that are prevalent in many American churches that can further this damage. But there are also ways to approach these themes that allow Survivors openings to return to faith and the church.

“I choose to be responsible for making my own decision about whether to offer forgiveness to those who have hurt me or participated in the systematic enabling of child sex abuse.”

1. **Forgiveness:** This is a prevalent theme in Christianity with good reason. But, when forgiveness is rushed, or forced upon a Survivor, it has the effect of interrupting their process of recovery. It would be very helpful in the context of Survivors of child sexual abuse, as well as other traumas and conflicts, to understand forgiveness as a process, and not something that can be achieved in a single moment.



Preoccupation with forgiveness of an offender can become a barrier to healing, and an additional burden for the Survivor. Like discerning the best way in helping to build the Realm of God, Forgiveness is an ongoing effort of understanding that can engage the whole community, and includes elements like truth-telling, and insisting on appropriate justice and adjudication.

“I know that what happened to me was wrong and no longer accept demands that I disbelieve or question myself.



2. Suffering: The Suffering Christ is another long-standing tradition of Christianity that can have harmful side-effects. Jesus freely chose to suffer the humiliation and agony of the cross for God’s larger purpose. However, this model of willingly entering into suffering is quite different than the suffering that results when an older more powerful person chooses to sexually violate a child. For a Survivor, coping with the psychological effects of abuse for years, or to a child who is currently suffering sexual abuse, the Suffering Savior can be a difficult model that contains the danger of suffering as a virtue and a way to emulate Jesus. Shifting our focus to help Survivors come down from the cross on which they have been humiliated and crucified, mourn their deep losses, and rise up as resurrected people is a redemptive stance that can invite deep healing.



3. Peace But wait, how can peace be bad? If Peace is used to mean the lack of disturbance of our orderly community, or the absence of anger or conflict, many Survivors may be left feeling silenced. Righteous anger can be sacred, and disturbing behaviors resulting from childhood trauma might be better tolerated if we are aware of the background they arise out of and know how to respond in ways that heal rather than harm.

If we can understand Peace as the presence of justice and the safety for Survivors to tell their truth and be believed, then perhaps we can create spaces of peace and real sanctuary for the many Survivors among us.

by Pastor Mark Harris, M.Div.
Salem UCC
Columbia, PA

“ I know the movement to bring about awareness of this epidemic of abuse requires systemic change and I join those who call for an awakening.

1

Guide to Conversations in the Congregation

A. Talking About Child Sexual Abuse at Church

Sometimes the shock of learning about this painful issue may lead us to make statements out of anger or fear that can re-traumatize Survivors and others.

Never assume you are not talking to a Survivor of child sexual abuse, even if you think you know that person very well. You typically will not know who has experienced it unless they tell you. **Never assume a Survivor has only one perpetrator.** Because sexual abuse at a young age leaves a child very vulnerable, many Survivors endure abuse from more than one person.

Never assume you are not talking to a family member or close friend of a Survivor. There are parents, grandparents, and others whose hearts have been broken by the devastation they have witnessed in the lives of Survivors they love. Some remain close to the Survivor. Others find the Survivor no longer wants to be around anyone they believe failed to protect them.



Here are some examples of harmful comments:

- If anybody did that to my child or grandchild, I would kill him!
- I guess anybody that has been abused like that is scarred for life. Ruined forever!
- I think when someone says they were abused by an older sibling; it is less serious than if it were an adult. After all, kids fool around sometime.
- He/she is just trying to blame someone else for (addictions/self-harm/suicide attempts). We have all had troubles in our lives.
- Survivors that cannot forgive are not good Christians!

In these examples, we fail to consider the complexity of the intimate circles in which child sex abuse often occurs, the serious consequences of abuse, or the possibilities of healing for Survivors. The offender may be the Survivor's brother or grandparent; the Survivor may be struggling to heal.

We can all educate ourselves more about the impact of sexual abuse, and how to help those who are directly impacted. *The Resources for Survivors & Those Who Walk with Them* section in this Guide includes websites and books, as well as information on retreats and groups offered by the Safe Church program at Safe Communities.

B. Talking with Survivors

If a Survivor discloses abuse to you, it is a sacred trust. Be careful not to interpret calmness as a sign that abuse did not occur. Some Survivors become numb and do not feel anything; others express great emotion.

“ I believe my story and pass along the ability to believe to every other person who has been abused. I will no longer be a participant in the deception that provides cover for abusers.

Some examples of helpful and affirming responses:

I believe you. / It took a lot of courage to tell me about this.

It can be extremely difficult for Survivors to come forward and share their story. They may feel ashamed, concerned that they won't be believed, or worried they'll be blamed. The person who violated them may be someone you know and respect.

It's not your fault. / You didn't do anything to deserve this!

No child is ever responsible for being abused.

Survivors often blame themselves, especially if the perpetrator was someone close to them. Remind the Survivor, more than once, that they are not to blame.

You are not alone. / I care about you and am here to listen or help in any way I can.

Let the Survivor know that you are there for them and willing to listen to their story if they are comfortable sharing it. While you can't "fix" anything, you can be a compassionate presence and sit with their pain.

I'm sorry this happened. / This shouldn't have happened to you.

Acknowledge that the experience has affected their life. Phrases like "This must be really tough for you," and, "I'm so glad you are sharing this with me," help to communicate empathy.

Would you like to pray together?

Always ask this question before you offer to pray with them, or quote scripture. Some Survivors welcome this, and others do not, due to the complicated spiritual impact of sexual abuse. Time and healing are needed before relationship with God can be restored for many.



C. Respecting Survivor Stories

It is critical that we respect the confidentiality of any disclosure we receive from a Survivor and never share information without permission from the Survivor.

Even if a Survivor shares their story with others, it does not mean we have the right to ask questions concerning details at any time.

A Survivor may decide to share with a group, at worship, or write a book. This should not be interpreted to mean their story may be casually explored further in future conversations or encounters at church or other places. Always ask.

“Although at one time I did not know my story had value, I am learning to use my story of resilience to encourage others to speak out.

D. Understanding “Triggers”

A trigger is like an electrical current that suddenly jolts the body into an extreme stress related response, that can range from floods of neurochemicals hijacking the body into preparing for fight or flight, or conversely, causing a sensation of numbness and shutdown.

Trauma related emotions, sensations or memories are often “triggered” by anything reminiscent of the trauma...a particular smell, a sudden loud noise, a piece of music, a person that looks similar to the offender, being touched without consent, and being in a situation where the Survivor feels lack of control or being trapped. An abuse of power by a person in authority is particularly triggering for Survivors.

Although many manage to appear unaffected to others when they are triggered, they pay a high internal price, and the trauma damage is compounded.



2

Elements of a Safe Environment for Survivors

Here are some actions you can take to create a safe and sensitive environment for Survivors in your faith community:

A. Prayers

Include Survivors of sexual and domestic violence in the prayers of the church on a regular basis.

Just as we pray for the sick, the grieving, and those struggling with addictions or family difficulties, we need to also pray for the Survivors in our congregation and our community, many of whom carry invisible wounds. Naming this type of violence out loud is important.

B. Preaching

Preach on texts that bring to light sexual and other violence against the most vulnerable among us.

(See Part 4, Worship Resources, Sermon Texts & Seeds)

Use current stories in the media as opportunities to preach on this issue. Be very clear that sexual abuse is never the fault of the victim and that offenders must be held accountable before the church, and by secular authorities.

“I have learned that abuse is perpetuated and allowed to continue when abusers demand silence. I refuse to accept this form of violence.”



Survivors may be triggered if they suddenly hear a sermon about sexual violence when it has not been the custom of the church to raise this issue. Pastors should ensure that the congregation is aware of the topic to be preached on well ahead of time so that survivors can decide whether or not to be present and if they are, to practice self-care and reach out for support if needed.

C. Greeting/Passing the peace

Develop practices of greeting and passing the peace that do not involve touch.

Never assume it is OK to hug or touch another person. Many Survivors of interpersonal violence are very triggered by touch, even though they often appear unaffected. Always ASK before you hug or touch another person if that is OK and wait for their answer. Be respectful if they say no. Better yet - find ways of showing a caring connection that do not involve touch.

D. Communion and foot washing

Develop alternative practices for communion and foot washing that are offered to anyone who prefers them.

Kneeling for communion, as well as the expectation that an officiant will place bread directly in the mouth of a congregant, or bring a cup to their lips, can often reactivate prior sexual abuse trauma for Survivors.

“I have come to see that I was groomed as a victim by those who held power over me, including patriarchal systems, such as government, church, educational institutions. I have learned to recognize the signs of being groomed by these systems and to claim my right to resist them.”



An alternative practice is to offer a communion call to the altar for anyone wishing to stand for communion and hold out their hand to receive the bread or the wine. Offer a symbolic foot washing for those who prefer to keep on their shoes, using reverential hand gestures that replicate the act of washing another's feet without direct touch.

E. Liturgies/readings on forgiveness

Be cautious of liturgies and responsive readings that ask congregants to forgive any offenses against them.

This can not only put someone who is currently experiencing violence in more danger by their abuser insisting on forgiveness while violence continues, but also do great spiritual harm to Survivors of past abuse who are not at a point of forgiveness.

F. Problematic pronouns

Single pronouns confirm stereotypes.

Remember that both boys and girls are sexually abused, and that women as well men, are offenders.

When talking about offenders, avoid exclusive use of the male pronoun "he". Use he/she/they.

When talking about victims, avoid exclusive use of the female pronoun "she". Use he/she/they.

G. Inviting Survivor testimony

Invite Survivors who are public speakers to share testimony with your congregation.

Many Survivors are willing to speak to congregations about their experiences of abuse and healing and the resulting impact on their faith. Stories are very powerful and get beyond the facts and statistics.



I choose to call out the behavior of others who blame victims.

Be sure to let the congregation know well ahead of time so that other survivors who may be triggered can decide whether or not to be present and if they are, to practice self-care and reach out for support if needed.

H. Support Groups: Hosting Support Groups at your Church

If you offer community support groups at your church for people struggling with addictions, divorce, and other issues, be sure to include groups for those who have suffered sexual or domestic violence as children/adults. The absence of any such group signals to Survivors that their pain is not worthy of attention.

We suggest that a trauma-trained facilitator should guide these discussions to ensure safety.

I. Publicizing Healing Opportunities

Be sure to include notifications of Survivor retreats, groups and conferences in your newsletters or bulletins.

J. Counseling Referral Lists

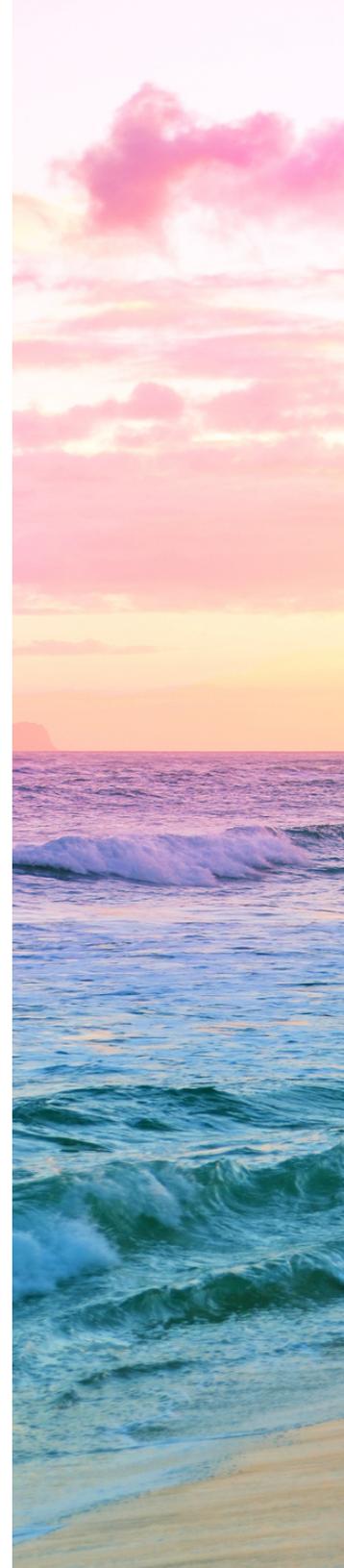
Develop a Counseling Referral List

Invest some time in finding out the most highly recommended trauma-trained counselors and support groups in your community who work with Survivors of sexual abuse and make a list. Convert this into a flyer or pamphlet that will be readily available to Survivors.



Safe Communities offers Survivor speakers for worship services, as well as trauma-informed faith-based groups and retreats for Survivors at various locations, including virtual formats.

Learn more at www.safecommunitiespa.org



Pastoral Care for Survivors

A. Elisha & Elijah: A Model for Pastoral Care

By Pastor Mark Harris, M.Div., Salem UCC, Columbia PA

Note the title of this section: “Pastoral Care for Survivors.” It has long been the practice of many Christian clergy to describe what they do with congregants as counseling. This word was avoided deliberately here. The word counseling, especially for those recovering from serious trauma, implies a level of therapeutic skill not possessed by most clergy members.

Pastors often receive some training in offering help to those in need psychologically, but that training is by no means the equivalent of the multi-year degrees, the certification programs, or the supervised practicums required to be a licensed therapist.

Therefore, I encourage fellow Pastors to use the term Pastoral Care instead.

This is perhaps especially important in traditions in which congregants might go to the Pastor instead of seeking a therapist. This does not lessen in any way the importance of the Pastor’s role. One illustration of the difference between the relationships a Pastor and a therapist have with people can be found in intention.

Usually, the therapist is seeking to create a neutral, safe space in which the patient can explore what confronts them. The therapist is called to engage and understand negative feelings about a client’s self, as well as positive feelings.

The Pastor should certainly also be concerned with safety, but rather than neutrality, emphasize the message of worthiness and love and justice that is at the core of Christianity.



The Pastor is called specifically to be a friend and an ally for those attempting recovery from traumatic events. We are called to see the beauty in every soul and proclaim God's love and grace to the people we care for.

The model for Pastoral Care that I prefer is Elisha and Elijah from 2 Kings 2:1-15, with the Pastor as Elisha. Elisha stayed with Elijah, even when he was told to leave him.

He devoted himself to the prophet, and thus witnessed Elijah's ascendance, and was allowed to dress in his garments. Are those among us struggling to heal from some of the worst ways we hurt each other not prophets in their own right?

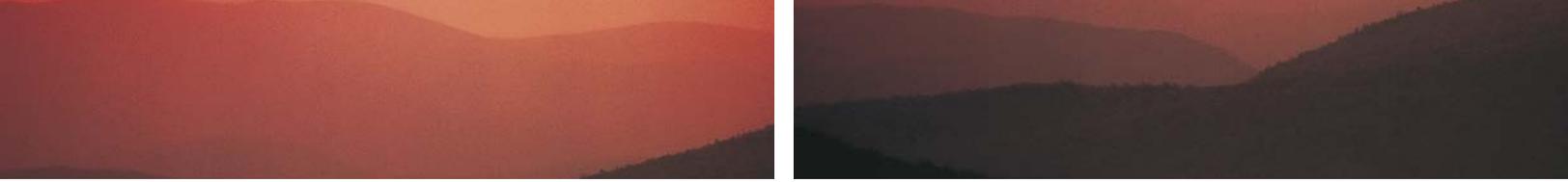
When survivors speak their truth and cry out for justice, do they not take up the prophetic mantle?

And, if we sustain our journey with them to the place that they ascend, can we then be allowed to take up their garments, to preach and lead from a place that is endowed with and informed by their courage and their experiences?

Survivors of child sexual abuse are a diverse group, both with regards to their backgrounds, and with regards to their progress on their journeys of healing. In a Pastor, they don't need a doctor. Rather, they need an unwavering companion who will not abandon them, no matter what. None of us have all the answers we need before we look for them.

Survivors need someone to join them on their journey, and to help them find the answers and the resources they need.

The pace, the direction, and the length of that journey must be led by the survivor. This is a case in which the authority of the Pastor must be secondary to the needs of the person in their care. Also, with regard to power, the omnipresence and omnipotence of God can be problematic for survivors of child sexual abuse. Often survivors are people who, during the worst parts of their lives, were lorded over by a seemingly ever-present and all-powerful force in the person of their abuser.



It is understandable that survivors might draw negative parallels between this image of God, and their own experiences.

I encourage Pastors to acknowledge that faith, just like forgiveness, is a process, and not an event. Survivors who have already learned this omnipotent image of God may hate God. After all, why would an all-powerful deity allow the pain and suffering of their trauma to have occurred at the hands of another?

If we truly believe in the God we preach, we should already know that God can handle our hatred and anger, and even expects it. Check the Book of Job. Reread the accounts of Jesus asking forgiveness for His torturers and murderers in the Gospels. In my personal journey of survival and recovery from the trauma of sexual abuse, I was filled with enough rage that some was bound to spill over into the theological realm. This is perhaps more common for male victims, as we are taught the righteousness of rage by our culture, but I assure you that a deep well of anger exists in most survivors.

Over time, as I metabolized my trauma, my anger at the God who allowed my experiences, and my frustration with a Jesus whose sacrifice seemed to have done little to remove sin from the world transformed.

I encourage Pastors who are walking with survivors to offer other images of God besides the all-powerful and ever-present. It is possible for God to be always there for you without always watching you. A mentor of mine favored the image of a big, backyard hammock for God: a web of support that can hold us safely and allow us to truly relax into ourselves and enjoy Creation. There is a Jewish saying that each and every blade of grass has its own angel encouraging it, whispering, “Grow! Grow!”

“
I will be vulnerable enough to discover and know the pain I hold from the abuse I experienced, so that the people in my life can experience the love I hold for them.



B. Accompaniment: A Framework for Pastoral Care

By Linda Crockett, Director, Safe Communities, Lancaster PA

In my book *The Deepest Wound* (Writer's Showcase, 2001) which describes my journey of healing from childhood sexual abuse as I accompanied refugees in war zones in El Salvador, I define accompaniment as walking with those who suffer, forming relationships with Survivors that allow us to listen to their stories and to hear their pain. To accompany a victim of torture in a war, or to accompany a Survivor of childhood sexual violence, is to bear witness to their journey, and to support their attempts to liberate themselves from the chains of past abuse.

“I will no longer bargain for the possibility of love by remaining silent. I have found people who will love me when I speak uncomfortable truths.”



Although healing from childhood sexual abuse is a long and often arduous journey and usually requires the help of a counselor trained in this type of trauma, a Pastor can play a vital role. A mistake many Pastors make is believing that if they refer a Survivor to a trained counselor, their work is finished. A supportive network of trauma-informed people in a faith community greatly assists a Survivor in healing. As leaders of faith communities, Pastors play an important role when they learn how to accompany Survivors of childhood sexual trauma.

In my book, I outline three critical steps for such accompaniment. For Pastors, the first is to learn about the long-term impact of the trauma of childhood sexual abuse, and about the process and stages of healing. The second is to assess one's own capacity to hold Survivor stories and walk with them in their suffering. This is challenging and means that Pastors need to have good support systems in place. The third is to honor the wisdom of Survivors, learning from each Survivor what is needed.



Worship Resources, Sermon Texts & Seeds

- A. **The Story of Tamar: A Responsive Reading for Worship**
Sermon Text: 2 Samuel 13: 1 -21 – The Rape of Tamar

- B. **Note on Sermon Seeds, & Preaching on Rape and Abuse**

- C. **Sermon Seed:**
Destruction of Sodom
Text: Genesis 19: 1-29
The Judgment of Sodom
Text: Genesis 18: 16-33

- D. **Sermon Seed:**
The Levite's Concubine
Text: Judges, chapters 19, 20, 21

*For further discussion about pastoral care or sermon seeds, leaders are encouraged to contact
Pastor Mark Harris at uccmharris@gmail.com or Linda Crockett at
Lcrockett@safecommunitessa.org*

The Story of Tamar: A Responsive Reading

2 Samuel 13:1-21

Leader: Now Absalom, David's son, had a beautiful sister, whose name was Tamar; and after a time Amnon, David's son, loved her. And Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar; for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her.

Response: Lord, help us stay grounded in your presence as we listen to this story. Open our hearts to learn lessons from this ancient text that serve to keep our children safe today.

Leader: But Amnon had a friend, whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David's brother; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. And he said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed, and pretend to be ill and when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me bread to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, that I may see it, and eat it from her hand.'"

Response: We acknowledge the reality that most children are not sexually abused by strangers, but by those they trust and love. A focus on 'stranger danger' is not adequate to protect our children.

Leader: So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill; and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Pray let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat them from her hand." Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house and prepare food for him."

Response: We acknowledge the parents among us who are, like David, deceived by a family member or close friend.

Leader: So, Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. And she took dough, and kneaded it, and made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. And she took the pan and emptied it out before him, but he refused to eat. And Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So, everyone went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber that I may eat from your hand." And Tamar took the cakes she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother.

Response: The trust and vulnerability of our children place them at risk by those who would abuse their power and use them for their own purposes. Help us to protect them, and to teach them how to stay safe from sexual harm.

Leader: But when she brought them near to him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, “Come lie with me, my sister.” She answered him, “No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this wanton folly. As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the wanton fools of Israel. Now therefore, I pray you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you.” But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her, and lay with her.

Response: With heavy hearts, we acknowledge the reality that someone with greater strength can overpower another and impose their will through rape. We honor the courage and strength of victims in whatever form of resistance they choose in order to survive, including words, actions, or silence.

Leader: Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred; so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, “Arise, be gone.” But she said to him, “No, my brother; for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other which you did to me.” But he would not listen to her. He called the young men who served him and said, “Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her.” Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for thus were the virgin daughters of the king clad of old. So, his servant put her out and bolted the door after her.

Response: How could Amnon do this to his sister? What caused him to believe he could violate her in this way? Lord, help us reach the Amnons among us before they do such harm.

Leader: And Tamar put ashes on her head and rent the long-sleeved robe which she wore; and she laid her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went. And her brother Absalom said to her, “Has Amnon your brother been with you? Now hold your peace, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart.” So, Tamar dwelt, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom’s house.

Response: All too often, victims are counseled to hold their peace rather than seek justice and healing. All too often, victims carry the burden of shame that rightfully belongs to the offender. We acknowledge the injustice of this and our responsibility as a community to break the cycle of silencing and shaming those who have been sexually violated.

All: We pray for the victims and Survivors among us. We pray for the strength to hear their stories, and the courage to accompany them in healing. We welcome the wisdom they carry, born of suffering, that helps to give voice to our sister Tamar.

We pray for the offenders among us. We ask that they find the courage to acknowledge full responsibility for their actions and engage in the hard work of repentance.

Leader: We ask forgiveness for ways in which we have contributed to the cycle of violence through word, action, silence, or inaction, adding to the burden of suffering caused by child sexual abuse.

Help us to use the power we have as adults by taking steps to protect all children from sexual abuse, not only in our churches but in our community.

We know, Lord, you hear the voices of the children who are suffering. Give us ears to hear as you do.

Scripture from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

*Prepared by Linda Crockett, Safe Communities, Lancaster, PA.
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B. Notes on Sermon Seeds & Preaching on Rape and Abuse

Pastor Mark Harris, M.Div.,
*with thanks to Dr. Julia O'Brien, Professor of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
at Lancaster Theological Seminary*

The sermon seeds that are provided here are heavy. They ask difficult questions about our faith and our culture. They stand in opposition to interpretations of Scripture that have become traditional. Perhaps most importantly, they contain Scripture that touches on subjects and events that can be surprising and frightening for some members of your churches.

Please refer back to the statistics provided in this Guide and accept that your congregation is entirely likely to contain people who have had varying experiences of sexual abuse and trauma.

The traditional interpretations of these Scriptures continue to be prevalent, linking the Sodom story with consensual homosexuality, rather than with rape.

The Levite's concubine is largely ignored by scholars who seem to wish that it would go away. These attitudes and interpretations are alive and well in our American culture. Christian churches do not organize protests when rapists are handed minimal sentences for their crimes, but rather when a baker refuses to bake a cake for a wedding.

Dr. Sonia Waters of Princeton Theological Seminary suggests a new interpretation of rape in the Hebrew Bible, in the stories I used and in others.¹ The idea that rape is abhorrent to God is supported by the longer narratives in these stories. The Sodom story eventually leads to a fearful Lot retreating to a cave, where his daughters in turn rape him in order to continue their family line.



The story of the Levite's concubine ends in a genocidal war. King David's rape of Bathsheba leads to him murdering his most trusted general and to the death of his own child. Tamar's rape leads to the death of both of her brothers, and civil war. In all of these cases, rape leads to the disruption of social order, and has dire consequences for all involved.

In addition to considering these new perspectives, I want to strongly encourage Pastors to take care in preaching on these texts. Offering a warning ahead of time may well be in order. Remember that many victims of sexual trauma have never told their story. Despite that fact, they might feel suddenly singled out when their Pastor begins preaching about rape from the pulpit. Give people time to prepare, and permission to remain absent from worship if that is what is best for them.

If you have the resources, providing some degree of counseling services after worship would be very healthy. At the very least, do not imagine that delivering the sermon will be the end of your

responsibility to your congregation. Verbally allowing for congregants to have difficulty in processing what you have said and being present and available for discussion and prayer afterward is essential.



I will call on all who hold positions of power to recognize the overwhelming prevalence of child sex abuse of children (of all genders) and the suffering endured by adult survivors.

¹ Waters, Sonia. (2017). *Reading Sodom through Sexual Violence Against Women*. Interpretation-Journal of Bible and Theology. 71(3). 274-283.



C. Sermon Seed: Destruction and Judgment of Sodom *Genesis 19:1-29 - Sodom and Gomorrah*

Pastor Mark Harris, M.Div.

This story has been used for a long time as an illustration of a God wrathful at the behavior of humanity. It has been errantly used as a cautionary tale against homosexuality that the term Sodomite has been used as an epithet against queer folk.

In using this text to preach about sexual abuse, however, I suggest focusing less upon God and God's wrath, and more upon the culture and society of the city in which Lot settled. It's unfortunate that many in Christianity use the early Hebrew Bible only as a place to find God, when it is so rich with stories in which we might find ourselves.

This story in particular is about complicity, and specifically complicity to abuse. The angels come to Sodom with an expectation of hospitality, but Lot knows better.

He brings them into his home in order to protect them from the mob that shows up soon after. Their intention, which they treat very much as their right, is to molest the travelers.

By intervening, Lot betrays the degree to which he has become steeped in the culture of Sodom. He does not warn the angels outright, nor does he stand himself against the mob demanding their right to abuse the strangers. Instead, he offers up his own daughters to them to have their way with. His complicity is such that he accepts the right the abusers believe they have and attempts to deflect it upon his own children in order to satiate the mob.



The angels do not allow this, bringing him back into the house and striking the people outside blind so that they cannot continue their attack. Then they advise that Lot and his family escape before the city is destroyed. Lot's complicity in the culture of abuse

that existed in Sodom is not absolved by the angels saving him. Indeed, as they stalled in leaving, the angels grab them by the hands and lead them away. This is described as God being merciful, not as Lot and his people being saved because they were blameless.

Genesis 18:16-33

The Judgement of Sodom

This is the Scripture that precedes the story of the destruction of the cities of the Plains, in which Abraham, Lot's brother, pleads with God to spare the city. The back-and-forth argument is almost bartering, Abraham attempting to negotiate the salvation of the city by the way of finding fewer and fewer righteous people. He haggles God down to ten. If ten righteous people can be found, then the city will be spared. Notably, the city is then not spared, leaving us to conclude that not even ten righteous people could be found there.

Again, this Scripture can be understood to be about complicity. This is a place where abuse is viewed as a right by the abusers,

and not even ten people can be found who stand against this wickedness. How do we view the Jerry Sandusky case in light of this illustration? How many individuals knew of the coach's abuse directly or indirectly, signing checks, hearing stories, catching things out of the corner of their eye? Would angels have found ten righteous people in the Penn State hierarchy then? How do we view Jeffrey Epstein? How do we understand our society and our culture in the light of a serial abuser who had many of the elite of entertainment and international finance at his parties? How would the angels view a society in which Presidents and Princes accept the invitations of men like Jeffrey Epstein?



D. Sermon Seed: The Levite's Concubine

Text: Judges chapters 19, 20, 21

This story, which has some things in common with the story of the angels in Sodom, has one element that the other does not: a victim. In this story, the Levite, a member of the priestly class, sacrifices his concubine, a young girl he took from Bethlehem, to the mob when they insist on someone to abuse.

The girl, who is never named in the passages, and indeed never speaks, is raped and abused all night long by the mob. At dawn, she drags herself back to the doorstep of the home where the Levite is a guest and dies of her injuries. It is there the Levite finds her in the morning.

His reaction to this offense, being that it happened in the city of a fellow tribe of Israelites, is to cut her body into twelve pieces and sends one to each tribe, inciting a war against the tribe which possessed the city where the offense took place.

In the story of the Levite's concubine, what is perhaps most important is that which is left out. The story has sacrifice and horrific abuse; it has shame and anger; it has revenge, retribution, and a sort of justice.

But in no corner of the story, from the beginning to the end does it have the voice of the victim. The sacrifice is seen through the eyes of the Levite, who pushes his young concubine through the door to save himself. The abuse is only ever witnessed in its aftermath, in the crumpled body left upon the doorstep. The shame is for the city, and the anger of the Levite drives him to start a war that nearly results in the destruction of an entire tribe. But there is no grieving or shame for the victim. There is nothing resembling justice for her. Instead, her body is used after her death to ignite further violence and abuse.

How can we try to hear the voice of the voiceless victim in this story? What would she say, had she a name and a voice? When she crawled back to the Levite after such horrific abuse, was she seeking his protection in the way many child victims look to their perpetrators for care and comfort? Given the statistics provided in this pamphlet about the prevalence of child sexual abuse, how many others remain voiceless among us? How do we allow them the space, and the safety to speak?

A. Resources for Survivors & those who care for them **BOOKS**

Bass, Ellen & Davis, Laura: *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, Harper & Row, 20th Anniversary Edition 2008

Brock, Rita Nakashima and Parker, Rebecca, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, Beacon, 2001

Crockett, Linda: *The Deepest Wound: How a Journey to El Salvador Led to Healing from Mother-Daughter Incest*, Writer's Showcase, 2001

Poling, James Newton: *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*, Abingdon Press, 1991

Ellison, Randy: *Boys Don't Tell: Ending the Silence of Abuse*, Morgan James Publishing, 2012

Foote, Catherine: *Survivor Prayers: Talking with God about Childhood Sexual Abuse*, Westminster, 1994

Forsythe, Liria: *Products of Grace: Biblical Stories of Abuse for Today's Survivors*, Speak Truth Ministries, 2017.

Langberg, Diane, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores*, 2015

Lew, Mike: *Victims No Longer*, HarperCollins, 2004.

Quinn, Jenna: *Pure in Heart: A Memoir of Overcoming Abuse and Passing Jenna's Law*, Liberty House Publishing, 2017

Radcliff, Lisa: *Hidden with Christ: Breaking Free from the Grip of your Past*, 2018

Van der Kolk M.D., Bessel: *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in The Healing of Trauma*, 2015

Stephens, Darryl, & Elizabeth Soto Albrecht: *Liberating the Politics of Jesus: Renewing Peace Theology Through the Wisdom of Women*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020



WEBSITES

Our Stories Untold

<http://www.ourstoriesuntold.com>

Survivors speak out about abuse in Mennonite churches and schools

SafeCommunities

www.safecommunitessa.org

Prevention of child sexual abuse workshops, groups and retreats for Survivors, training, education, and policy making for churches and organizations on child protection

Survivors stories at the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN)

<https://www.rainn.org/Survivor-stories> - Survivors share their stories

National Sexual Assault Hotline 24/7 CHAT

<https://hotline.rainn.org/online> or call 1-800-656-4673

lin6

www.lin6.org (male Survivors of child sexual abuse)

Stop it Now!

www.stopitnow.org

Wings Foundation

www.wingsfound.org



B. Resources from Safe Communities for Congregations

Breaking the Silence:

A pastoral interview with a Survivor during worship

Many Survivors report they have never heard a sermon addressing the pain and hurt caused by child sexual abuse. Some Pastors don't know where to start. Breaking the Silence is a carefully curated set of questions posed by a Pastor to a Survivor during worship as an informal interview while the congregation “listens in”.

Survivors available for interviews are Linda Crockett, Director of Safe Communities, and Pastor Mark Harris, a contributor to this Guide. The interview is intended to help congregants understand the long-term impact of sexual abuse, as well as the important role faith communities can play in healing.

To schedule an interview with Pastor Mark or Linda, contact Safe Communities.

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**Statistics are important, but
our stories are so much more
important.**



Workshops Available to Create Safe Environments for Survivors

These workshops are available at no cost to the congregation through October 31, 2021 due to a grant from the LMC Legacy Foundation.

For the Congregation

- Spiritual Wounds of Sexual Abuse
- Forgiveness: Does One Size Fit All?
- Accompaniment of Survivors in a Church Setting

For Parents

- Keeping Your Kids Safe: CSA Prevention 101 for Parents
- Social Media Navigation with Kids
- Healthy Relationships & Respect
- Understanding Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity

For the Elementary-age Children in Your Congregation

- Basic Body Safety
- It's OK to Tell
- What Would You Do If...?

For the Jr. High Youth in your Congregation

- Healthy Relationships & Respect
- Social Media & Internet Safety
- Understanding Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity

Visit www.safecommunitiespa.org for full workshops descriptions and to schedule a workshop or survivor interview at your church, virtually or in person.

You may also contact Andrea Stoner Leaman, Program Manager, at 717.560.9989 or andrea@safecommunitiespa.org



C. Resources from Safe Communities for Survivors

Multi-week Circles of Hope

Circles of Hope groups are small groups of up to 8 participants. Each Circle runs for four evening sessions, and includes psychoeducation about trauma, journaling, reflection, dialogue and art. Supported by a skilled facilitator, the group considers the ways our lives have been shaped not only by our trauma, but by our struggle, strength and resilience. Circles are held virtually or in person, depending on COVID-19 restrictions.

Circles begin on the following dates in 2021:

January 14
February 23
April 14
October 19

”

I was told that no one would believe my story--I have learned that others believe and care about my experience.

Day-long Retreats

Journey with Tamar Retreats are one-day retreats held at various locations and offer survivors the opportunity to find common ground with each other as we use scripture, reflections, art, and music to journey along with Tamar, daughter of King David, who was raped by her half-brother. Retreats are held on the following Saturdays in 2021 (COVID-19 conditions permitting)

February 6
May 15
October 9

There is no cost to survivors for Circles or Retreats, but pre-registration is required. Visit www.safecommunitiespa.org for more information and to register for groups and retreats, as well as for a flyer to distribute.



The vision of Safe Communities is communities where all children and teens are free from sexual abuse, and survivors are empowered to live healthy, joyful and vibrant lives.

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