

## ONE

# A SAFE PLACE

*The truth does not change according to our  
ability to stomach it emotionally.*

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

*Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

JOHN 8:32 (NIV)

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### TIM'S STORY

The exact moment I realized I'd been sexually abused as a child, my family and I were waiting at an intersection in our car. We were on our way to lunch after church. I was fourteen years old.

I wasn't trying to think about it, and no one had mentioned it. It just came to me. I remember looking out the side window, zoning in on the raindrops dribbling down the window just in front of my face. This long moment remains like a still photo in my memory. My mind scanned my memory back and forth, recognizing, confirming. That happened to me. I've been abused.

As the car began to move forward, I tried to come to grips with this new information. I felt nervous and overwhelmed in my seat. A huge weight seemed to press into my chest, close to my throat. I undid my seatbelt and looked around the backseat.

My parents were talking to each other in the front seats, oblivious. To say anything to them was unthinkable. My nervousness shifted to fear, to an almost sick feeling. As the car drove on, I watched the passing houses and shops, sitting with this new truth, so suddenly and unavoidably present.

My young brain had somehow realized, comprehended, this uninvited truth. It would be a long time before I could find the proper words to describe the strange feeling of the painful memories. The closest I can come is that it felt like a shocking, overwhelming sadness. But it was more than sadness. I was unsettled, uncomfortable, and anxious.

As the car drove on, I didn't move in my seat, and I didn't speak a word about it. I wouldn't for another eight years.

**Your church is not an exception.** There are victims of sexual abuse in every community and institution in society, including churches. There are certainly victims of sexual abuse in your congregation. One of the serious dilemmas of the subject of child sexual abuse is that while it is incredibly widespread, it is also shrouded in secrecy and even denial. It is often invisible in our congregations because of the silence of the victims themselves. Powerful forces can keep it so, and the shame that victims feel can perpetuate the idea that “good” families are exempt from its reach.

But the now significant body of research agrees that sexual abuse spans races, socioeconomic classes, and religious and ethnic groups. Investigations clearly indicate that churches are no exception. Much media attention has focused on the Catholic Church, because of the significant number of clergy who have

been found to be perpetrators. I believe we may yet see the full extent of the disclosures elsewhere.

The specific issue of guarding against pedophilia in churches is outside the scope of this book. Even aside from the specific topic of abuse by clergy, we must not be blind to the fact that all church communities can be targets for pedophiles. It is absolutely essential that stringent policies and procedures be implemented in every ministry context, in line with standards set by state authorities and denominational bodies.

Our focus is on cultivating a safe church, where victims can become survivors. For this to occur, we must grasp clearly the fact that many in our congregations suffer in silence. Sadly, I am no longer surprised by who turns out to be a survivor. They are our neighbors, our friends, our colleagues, and certainly our congregation members.

This may seem a rather pedantic point to make to someone who has already decided to read this book. But I risk sounding pedantic for the purpose of clarity: too many people have ignored the issue of sexual abuse. We are beholden to look honestly at this uncomfortable reality, to accept the responsibility that comes with serving a community in a world where this evil occurs, and to be ready and able to respond to that reality. This begins with the clear decision that our church will be a safe place, well informed on the issue of sexual abuse.

### *Sermons Can Be Triggers*

There's a powerful dynamic at work when a speaker stands before a group of people, particularly when that speaker is sharing the Word of God. But consider that in any congregation, a number of people will have experienced sexual abuse

in childhood. Just acknowledging that fact helps us recognize the profound responsibility we have. The words we use in sermons can trigger unwanted images, feelings, and memories for these people.

Triggers are words and actions that prompt memories we would not have otherwise. We all experience triggers every day. Consider how hearing an old song, or a certain smell, can immediately take us back to a situation from years before. We may recall a long-buried memory that suddenly becomes vivid. Most of the time these moments are enjoyably nostalgic.

For abuse survivors, however, triggers can prompt flashbacks of the abuse experience or the feelings associated with the trauma. These experiences may continue throughout survivors' entire lives: I experience triggers to this day. Whenever I hear the name of the man who abused me, it has an effect on me unlike any other name. It is directly associated with the abuse. Whenever the topic of sexual abuse comes up on the radio or television, it captures not only my ear but also my mind's eye and my emotions. I'm also triggered when I see a certain type of pleated pants that Greg wore.

We cannot control these instances—they occur inevitably. I can't control it if someone named Greg stands before me wearing pleated pants. But I do know that this experience would have a strong emotional effect on me. The first thing on my mind would not be what they were talking about. We'll discuss how survivors can have strategies to manage triggers in a later chapter, but my point here is that Christian leaders should be conscious that at all times we are potentially speaking to some deeply vulnerable people.

Many people have been abused but have not disclosed their abuse to anyone. So we need to be aware that there may be a sizable number of individuals in our churches with unprocessed trauma. We must be careful how we speak, especially during a worship service. This is a place where people are willingly open and vulnerable, singing profound declarations of worship and seeking to receive teaching about matters related to their core values. It's a precious place.

Christian leaders should avoid making spontaneous comments about abuse. If we are going to address the topic of sexual abuse from the pulpit, through preaching, testimony, or teaching on the subject by an expert or a survivor, be sure to let the congregation know beforehand. Remember, it's not our role to try and trigger memories to evoke a response from people. A public worship gathering is not a safe context for this kind of deep, personal ministry. It requires private, professional focus and care.

Of course, we can't constantly walk on eggshells, afraid of how everything we say might play out in each and every life. We can and will inevitably trigger memories for people through our ministry. The next chapter will deal with how to respond when someone does actually disclose their experience of sexual abuse to us. But we must always be prudent and pastorally sensitive to the fragility of some members of our congregations.

Of course sermons can also be empowering and transformative, as the good news of the gospel is proclaimed to our hearts. Too many times to count I have been encouraged and equipped by faithful preaching. Often the sermon will be the only Christian word a suffering person receives, and it can be a defining moment in their life.

I suggest that we regularly say toward the end of our services, “If anything that’s been said has touched on or triggered something for which you’d like prayer or counsel, be aware we have these people available to speak with.” I know one church that not only has people available after the service but also includes a contact number in their bulletin that people can call and request to speak with someone during the week. This may seem obvious, but part of being a safe church is making the obvious explicit.

### *Understand the Subtle Power of Leaders*

If we want a safe and informed church, then as Christian leaders we must also come to appreciate the subtle power we hold in our church community due to our position. Because personal behavior so strongly influences the culture of the church community, people intuitively look to the church’s leaders as a barometer of expected behavior. Our words and actions signal what our community’s standard is. If we want a safe church, we must be safe leaders. Do we model the personality traits of a community conducive to helping people feel safe and welcome? Or are we trying to impress, and thus increasing the distance to others?

Leaders can demonstrate this principle through small details. For example, rather than being the hero of our own sermon illustrations, we can use examples when we were the student in a situation, rather than the teacher. We can demonstrate humility by honestly confessing our faults and owning our mistakes, and praising those who corrected us. Consider how we respond and speak to children. Do we just glance down at them, or do we take the time to squat down to their level? What about the volume of our voice or the language we use?

We should also be careful to avoid even slightly sexist jokes, and always respect people's personal space, taking the time to ask someone's permission before shutting the door of our office. These small habits send messages, and I'd encourage us all to consider how we can identify and modify these small details so that our lives engender the trust required for a vulnerable person to feel safe in our presence.

Let me give you another example. In meetings, many male leaders instinctively slump low in their chairs, with their legs slightly apart, and pushed forward. Despite the fact that it's poor posture, I know this can be a temptingly comfortable way to sit. But as a female leader once pointed out to me, this posture means we are prominently displaying our groin to the group. We don't think about it consciously, but women can notice it. It sends a subtle and impolite message of carelessness regarding personal boundaries. The same is true when we lean too closely over someone or step in too close when we speak with them. This is an issue not just for male leaders but for female leaders too. We should take thoughtful care with our speech, manner, and dress to communicate that this is a community that respects and cares for everyone. Rather than dressing to impress, dress to appear approachable.

Someone once told me that I had a habit of walking quickly, looking down, through the foyer of the church I was a pastor in at the time. I am an introvert, and I generally have several matters brewing in my mind simultaneously. But I was told it conveyed that I was in a rush, with important things to do—more important than relating to everyday people. What an indictment! That's the opposite of how I feel. I could protest my

innocence, but my actions had communicated a particular attitude to my congregation.

A pastor friend of mine was so determined to understand the gender dynamics of his ministry that he invited a female leader from the denomination to teach him the history of women's experience in that church. We cannot brush over these matters as we explore the weightier issues in future chapters. As leaders, our cues can be the defining difference in creating a safe culture in our church.

### *Train and Communicate*

We need to take the time to train our leaders not only in leadership or evangelism but also on the topic of sexual abuse. I believe we should include teaching and training on sexual abuse for all our leaders, including volunteers. It's important that they have some basic knowledge of this complex subject and clear understanding of the principles of child protection and expected procedures of response. When the church conducts this kind of training, it communicates that it is unafraid to tackle this topic and sends a powerful message that the church takes seriously its responsibility to create a safe environment for those who are broken and hurting.

We can reinforce this value by making sure there's information on our church website or in newsletters and posters about available counseling services. In as many ways as possible, cultivate a culture of safety. Remember, a church is a community where people come not only with particular brokenness but also *to be vulnerable*. The mysterious dynamics of singing, worship, prayer, preaching, and fellowship create an atmosphere where people's innermost feelings and values are opened, challenged,

healed, and nurtured. There really is nothing quite like being a part of a safe and informed local church.

### *Don't Go Hunting for Trauma*

It's not our role to try and coax the disclosure of a survivor. We must be very careful about this. These matters touch survivors' deepest wounds. Being in control of the moment of disclosure is actually an important part of a survivor's ultimate healing. When people are ready, they will share.

The church leader's task is to cultivate an environment where people feel safe. Especially in regard to sexual abuse, we want people to know that this is a place that will support and empower them, whatever they decide to do. We should never try to take that step for them, whether through altar calls, prophecies, sermons, or counseling. We should never try to manipulate or push someone to disclose.

In the following chapters we'll deal specifically with how to understand and help people who disclose childhood experiences of sexual abuse. Responding appropriately requires a determination to cultivate a church community that is trustworthy, safe, and informed. And this begins in the heart of the Christian leader.

### *Finding the Safety to Reveal Abuse*

Realizing that you were sexually abused as a child is a profoundly scary experience. While many survivors have always been aware, for some it is a gradual realization that becomes clearer as they grow older. Then, either as they reach an age of understanding or through a particular triggering event, one day it clicks.

That was Priscilla's experience. I did not see Greg for several years after my abuse, but she saw her father every single day. She recalls having a constant fear and sick feeling around him as she grew older, but it never added up to a cognitive realization of what was happening to her until she was watching a television show one day. The storyline involved a child disclosing abuse. She immediately realized what had been happening to her over the years, and it prompted her to disclose to her boyfriend, and soon after to her mother.

But experiences are varied. Many can hardly recall a day when they've not had to face these memories. This may be because the abuse occurred at (or continued into) a later age. But if the experience occurred in preteen childhood, flashes of memory accompanied by ugly feelings can make the horrible truth increasingly more vivid until they reach an age where they cross a line into conscious comprehension. Generally this occurs once they're old enough to understand more about what sexual abuse actually is. They learn about it on television, at school, or from their parents. It may take some time as their minds link the newfound knowledge with their unconscious memories, until suddenly the past pushes to the front of their mind. For both Priscilla and I, this happened in our teens. Others, however, don't realize what has happened to them until they are well into adulthood.

I have no idea what triggered my thoughts that day in my parent's car. They just suddenly turned to the topic of sexual abuse, and I realized that I had experienced it. But does that mean I had *forgotten* about it? Well, yes, you could put it that way. For a time the abuse had not been at the front of my mind.

I had blocked it out, buried it—waiting for the time when something would uncover or trigger it. It was waiting for me to grow old enough to understand. I was discovering a fact about myself, and that fact had a name: child sexual abuse.

Some survivors feel guilty about not realizing sooner, as if they've minimized the act. But this is beyond our control. I was a young teenager when I understood what had happened, and at that stage childhood memories come in moments, like photos, not like a film. I'd not thought about it prior to that morning. It had been filed with so many other childhood memories, present but unrecognized. When my mind put the pieces together that day, it suddenly made sense. I knew it was true.

Some survivors never forget, and live with vivid images and painful memories throughout their childhood. Others have unpleasant inklings but try to ignore them and never allow their minds to stop and reflect deeply on them. For still others, this takes many years, and they don't face the past until well into adulthood. It may seem quite a strange example, but I resonate with that scene in *Return of the Jedi* when Luke Skywalker reveals to Princess Leia that she is actually his sister. She is shocked, and yet she replies, "Somehow, I've always known."

Many survivors experience something akin to shock when they realize that something so traumatic has happened to them. This is called delayed recall, or posttraumatic amnesia. It is common in cases of sexual abuse, especially when the abuse occurred for a defined period of time and then stopped while the survivor was still a child. We rarely recall memories before the age of three, and have very limited memory up to the age of ten. My earliest memory is of the fish markets in Enschede, Holland,

where we stayed for a several months when I was four. The images are fleeting but present in my mind's eye, as are the smells.

So while we carry a huge array of memories from childhood, we forget an incredible amount, too. Consider all the data our senses receive every day. Over the years we can't possibly consciously hold on to all of it, and yet our brains seem to organize it somehow, identifying patterns and holding onto data reinforced through repetition. The experience of delayed recall, or post-traumatic amnesia, is a kind of protective mechanism our brains use because we are unable to comprehend the reality and extent of the trauma, especially when we're young. As children, we may not have the mental or emotional capacity to recognize that what was happening to us was abusive. That does not mean that we were indifferent to it: indeed, it may have involved physical pain, or we may have wanted it to stop, or even hated it.

But psychologists affirm that in cases of extreme emotional trauma in children, our ability to consciously consider what has occurred may be delayed until we have the ability to understand it or put our feeling into words. In my experience, I suddenly became consciously aware that *abuse* was something I had experienced. I reached a moment when my mind turned itself to the subject. It came into the front of my thoughts. I suddenly *knew* it.

For some people this moment of realization occurs in therapy. They may have gone for reasons related to the effects of abuse, and the safe context in which they carefully processed their thoughts and memories led to recalling the traumatic or abusive event from years before. We all tend to remember more when we're prompted or "triggered" by something familiar, such as an old photo or a memento from school. Suddenly images flood

back: people, names, peculiar details, even smells. Watching a home movie or browsing through a family photo album can do it. Stories can do it, too, when we hear anecdotes from friends that suddenly remind us of other situations, people, and events. Some feelings of nostalgia are very strong, almost like reliving snapshots of the past.

But sometimes the lapse of time and the distance in age and maturity give us a new perspective on an old memory. Thinking back as an adult, we suddenly realize a truth that we didn't see as a child, even though it is so familiar. Suddenly we see what we never saw before, and it all makes sense. For many of us, a similar process occurs at the moment we became aware of past abuse. Sometimes we never forget at all, sometimes the knowledge arrives with a growing awareness—and sometimes it explodes like a bomb.

### *Facing the Truth*

At this point, some survivors begin to wonder if it would have been better if they'd never remembered anything. That same part of us will be tempted to brush the memories aside, or try to forget them, pushing them down and covering them over. But not being consciously aware of abuse doesn't mean we're immune to its effects. It doesn't mean the experience hasn't been traumatic. We will explore this dynamic later on, but for now I urge you, as someone who has walked this path myself, not to try to deny the difficult truth when it appears. This is a frustrating, dangerous, and ultimately impossible feat.

Many thoughts will rush around our minds at this time: questions, fears, and even some doubts. One significant doubt we

often have is whether it really happened at all. I have sat with several people who confessed their fear that they may have just invented it somehow. *What kind of horrible person would I be if I were making all this up?* they wonder.

We worry that no one will believe us. In a sense it feels like the entire story exists only in our memory—in our head—so how do we know it's true? Our mind wanders into this kind of doubt because we are struggling to comprehend the enormity of the experience. It seems too enormous to be true. Doubting is a perfectly normal way of coming to grips with shocking news.

We might also think about how the person often seems such an unlikely perpetrator. How could he or she have committed these horrible acts? Most people picture sexual predators as strangers, anonymous people preying on playgrounds or abducting children off the street. But this image of sexual abuse is by far the less frequent, even if those are the stories that get broadcast on the news.

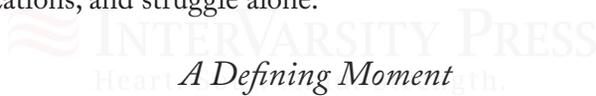
The truth is that eight out of ten survivors know their abuser. For both Priscilla and me, the perpetrator was actually living in our house. The overwhelming majority of perpetrators are trusted friends, family members, or neighbors. They are the people no one suspects. It's important to know this so that you do not feel like your experience is somehow unlikely or doubtful just because it happened somewhere familiar or was perpetrated by someone familiar.

You may think about how friendly, loved, or popular the person is who committed the act. Or how powerful they are, as figures of authority in your family or community. They don't

seem like the kind of person who would do this, and you are the only one who knows what they've done.

Somehow it can feel more likely that we've imagined something than that this person really committed a true, verifiable act. This is an especially likely thought if the abuse occurred a long time ago. Is it just a fragment of my imagination?

We are not going to be able to cope with our realization by ourselves. We need help and support even to comprehend the enormity of what we are realizing. Studies suggest that more than half of sexual abuse incidents are not disclosed. There are too many people who don't get past the point of their private realizations, and struggle alone.



Sexual abuse shapes our feelings, fears, instincts, and even our personalities throughout childhood. In this most vulnerable of life stages, our inner world is undermined. This is why the moment when we realize and acknowledge to ourselves that we've been abused is a profoundly important one. And though it is a horrible experience to remember, it's also a defining moment, and it contains a strange element of hope.

Why? Because it marks the point when we begin to take back our life. In that moment, then and there, it is devastating news. It is almost too horrible to comprehend. But it brings to light something that has long been pulling the strings in the recesses of our mind for some time. Now we see at least that there is a situation, a problem—a reason for our struggles all along. Ultimately, the words of Princess Leia will resonate: somehow, we have always known. The pain from our memory now shouts its presence. This

is just the beginning of the journey—but remember, we are only in chapter one. This moment is about recognizing the truth: the moment I can say to myself, *this happened*.

