

Susan Codone, a Survivor of Clergy Sexual Abuse in a Southern Baptist Church



The disruption of my life began at age 14 in my small Southern Baptist church a few miles outside of Birmingham, Alabama. For months, my youth minister had showered me with flattering attention, telling me that God had chosen me to help his ministry. This grooming led to 18 months of progressively worse sexual abuse, layered with threats. When I could not tolerate the abuse any longer, I told the only person whom I thought could stop it—my pastor. Implausibly, he was not receptive, and suggested that maybe I had brought it on myself.

Now put your feet in my teenage Nikes and try to comprehend the extent of this evil. I had no way of knowing that my pastor not only knew about the abuse, but also was having an affair with my Sunday School teacher; the two ministers were locked in their own secrecy battle and had checkmated each other with blackmail, to my detriment. My pastor's response was to fire the youth minister and pick up with me where the youth minister had left off. For another year, I stared at the worn carpet in my pastor's office while he told me about pornography and activities I was still too young to understand, praying for the horror to stop. Finally, a deacon caught my pastor in his affair, and my horror ended. Yet for years I remained locked in my own silent prison, held quiet by the deadbolt of their threats to harm my family if I told anyone. Meanwhile, they moved on to churches throughout Alabama during their careers and likely abused others.

I am living proof that sexual abuse has been overlooked for many years in Southern Baptist churches. The research literature in medicine, psychology, and counseling overflows with studies suggesting that sexual abuse, as an adverse childhood event, results in a predictable adult life cycle of depression, anxiety, mood disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, isolation, hopelessness, suicidality, and more. When it occurs in the church, the additional trigger of spiritual betrayal instigates extensive self-blame and pervasive shame. When we encounter trauma, we most often search for God, but what happens when trauma occurs in the church? Sexual abuse in the church is a desecration, a violation of the most sacred role and relationship, a trauma leaving emotional and spiritual blinders. It kills the spirit. It is evil of the highest order.

It is a children's Sunday School answer to say that sin is the cause, and superficial at best. The cause of sexual abuse in the SBC is rooted in our culture of casual indifference to predatory sexual behavior. This indifference is the expressionless face of denial and silence. Worn like a shield, indifference results in the catch-and-release practice of catching predatory staff members in the act and releasing them to move freely among other churches and organizations and harm others.

This practice may pretend to protect the institution, but not the victims.

Indifference also leads to the upside-down prioritization of mercy over justice, demonstrated by the persistent protection of vaunted leaders who have clearly abused young people. When our churches,

agencies, and seminaries try to act first out of mercy rather than justice when confronting sexual abuse, we marginalize both the victims and God Himself.

Likewise, we see this look-the-other-way indifference in our systemic failure to use law enforcement in favor of “just dealing with it in the church.” Sexual abuse is not a mistake, bad behavior, a reaction to stress, or a lapse in judgment. It is a crime, and abusers must face arrest and prosecution. In Southern Baptist culture, we have reversed God’s design; forgiveness and mercy originate from the victim and from God, not from the church as an employer. Determining innocence or guilt belongs to the courts. Sexual abuse is sin, but in classic preaching mnemonics, the sin driving sexual abuse is empowered by our culture of Silence, Indifference, and Neglect.

Sexual abuse in the SBC is an epidemic powered by a culture of our own making. The work of the Study Group will not stop this epidemic right away. It takes years of purposeful work to change the culture of indifference and develop a cure for such a poison. However, the Study Group’s work can serve as a vaccine, inoculating our churches with the conviction of the deadened sin that has harmed so many. It takes a movement to change the culture, not a mandate, and movements begin with the undeniable burden that things are not right the way they are and must change. In this movement, we are not an autonomous group of 47,000 churches; we are accountable as one body and capable of leveraging our enormous collective power to topple the culture of indifference. Sexual predators won’t stop just because we start paying attention . We will never rid ourselves of their evil, but we can reduce the risk and protect our own. Do you feel the conviction that things are not right the way they are? I have lived it deep in my soul for over 30 years. We have a path forward that is within our collective power . Will we take that path and fight this evil, together as one? I was crushed. How many other kids had been hurt by Dan? How many more would be hurt in the name of keeping up appearances that everything was alright in our churches?

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