

Project
Safe
Church

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the survivors. You urged me on—for the most part unknowingly. Your silent struggles moved me past my comfort line into the fray. Thank you.

Disclaimers

Let this suffice as a trigger warning for the entire book. Its pages are filled with stories and discussions about sexual abuse and related themes. Survivor readers: Be forewarned that if you are in too fragile a state, this book may be counterindicated. However, it is our belief that exposure to honest discussions on these matters can be healing, particularly if experienced with the support of a good counselor. Proceed with caution.

This book is the work of lay members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is not officially endorsed or commissioned by the Church. While we cite the abuse response policy of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, we do so not as representatives of the NAD, but as members of it.

The use of this book should not replace professional counseling for those experiencing trauma-related symptoms.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| INTRODUCTION..... | XI |
| CHAPTER 1 SEXUAL ABUSE COMES TO CHURCH | 1 |
| CHAPTER 2 IDENTIFYING PERPETRATORS..... | 15 |
| CHAPTER 3 RESPONDING EFFECTIVELY | 29 |
| CHAPTER 4 DISCERNING GENUINE REPENTANCE | 45 |
| CHAPTER 5 SERVANT LEADERSHIP..... | 59 |
| CHAPTER 6 FORGIVING WITHOUT ENABLING..... | 75 |
| CHAPTER 7 TRAUMA AND THE PATH FORWARD..... | 87 |
| CHAPTER 8 MARY MAGDALENE..... | 101 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| TOOLBOX..... | 111 |
| SPECTRUM OF ABUSE ASSESSMENT | 115 |
| A SURVIVOR'S PLAN FOR HEALING FROM TRAUMA..... | 117 |
| ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACE) SCALE | 125 |
| BIBLE PASSAGES ABOUT MARY MAGDALENE..... | 129 |
| CHILD SEX OFFENDER CONTRACT..... | 135 |
| EIGHT CLASSIC WARNING SIGNS OF A SEXUAL PREDATOR..... | 137 |
| FORGIVENESS JOURNEY | 139 |
| GOD AND BOUNDARIES..... | 153 |
| JOURNALING THERAPY | 159 |
| LISTENING WELL..... | 161 |
| MORE ABUSE RESPONSE RESOURCES | 165 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| OFFICIAL REPORT TEMPLATE | 167 |
| POST TRAUMATIC GROWTH INVENTORY..... | 169 |
| READING LIST..... | 171 |
| RED FLAGS OF A CHILD SEX OFFENDER..... | 173 |
| SERVANT LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORAL SCALE-6 | 175 |
| SEXUAL ADDICTION RECOVERY | 177 |
| SIX CLASSIC STEPS OF A CHILD SEX OFFENDER | 181 |
| THEOTHERAPY FOR TRAUMA SURVIVORS | 183 |
| UNDERSTANDING AND IMPLEMENTING SEXUAL MISCONDUCT POLICY E-87..... | 191 |
| WARNING SIGNS OF SEXUAL ABUSE IN CHILDREN..... | 207 |

Introduction

What you are viewing or holding in your hands is a valuable resource that has been needed for a long time. It is a wake-up call for churches to arise as safe places that, through education and advocacy, prevent abuse and respond to it effectively when it does occur. This important book, written by a mental health professional and contributed to and edited by an attorney and professor of law and religion, is most timely. With numerous years of experience serving and advocating for men and women who have experienced hurt, Dr. Jennifer Jill Schwirzer and Dr. Nicholas Miller courageously speak truths that at times are simply too painful or scary for many to acknowledge. Understanding that a person's view of, and relationship with, a loving Savior can be impacted by this complex issue, Nick and Jennifer have endlessly spoken up, advocated, and trained many of us while encouraging all to speak up and act. Now, this information and call to action is compiled for ease of access and sharing.

In addition to excellent content and definitions, important explanations are shared about the significant impact of trauma and the hope and healing that can occur in the context of the safe church community God calls us to be. The book speaks to those wounded and those supporting them. Furthermore, it bravely discusses how to respond to perpetrators, giving practical steps of compassionate discipline focusing on protection and safety while not neglecting the role of forgiveness. Listing practical and support resources within and without the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, this book needs to be read and used by individuals, churches, and most importantly, leaders. This is a somber topic. I am

grateful Jennifer and Nick have devoted their efforts to gathering this information into a book that is comprehensive and clearly-written. This guide will help all of us become better safe church members, bringing healing and growth through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Ingrid Slikkers, LMSW, CCTP, CFTP
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CHAPTER 1

Sexual Abuse Comes to Church

Lori Anne Thompson met Christian celebrity apologist Ravi Zacharias in the fall of 2014 at a professional luncheon she attended with her husband, Brad. Upon seeing the pretty blonde, Zacharias had his assistant find her email address. They began an online relationship in which he acted as a helpful pastoral figure. Having grown up in an abusive environment, Thompson had serious spiritual questions which this illustrious figure seemed happy to answer.

But things did not stay pastoral. Zacharias, 30 years Lori's senior, became a sounding board for the deep psychological wounds she'd suffered. Out of respect for what she believed was a father-daughter relationship, she ignored his suggestive comments. Eventually things devolved into him asking for nude photos and intimate liaisons. This troubled her.

Lori shared her concerns with a Christian therapist, who told her that to tell others would result in damage to the kingdom of God. When Lori emailed Zacharias that she planned to discontinue the relationship and tell her husband, he emailed back a suicide threat: "You promised you wouldn't Lori Anne. If you betray me here I will have no option but to bid this world goodbye I promise."¹

1 <https://julieroys.com/ravi-zacharias-sexting-predator/>

Zacharias died a few years later of cancer. A posthumous investigation revealed that this halo-wearing Christian celebrity had contact information for more than 200 massage therapists as well as hundreds of images, some naked, of young women he had solicited. Allegations of sexual abuse in spas he both owned and frequented tumbled forth from there.² One woman said the apologist forced her to “pray with him to thank God for the ‘opportunity’ they both received,” calling her his “reward” for serving God.

He warned this woman that if she ever spoke out against him, she would be responsible for the loss of millions of souls.³ I (Jennifer) spoke personally to a spa owner from Atlanta who told me Zacharias frequented her spa, and one day his massage therapist exited the room very distraught, would not speak of what happened, and quit shortly afterward.

It is a sad reality indeed that loathsome corruption can lurk behind an appearance of holiness. Sexual abuse comes to church sometimes; hopefully this book will help us fight it. Our first chapter will give a brief overview of the problem. To start, we’ll look at a definition of sexual abuse, specifically church-related sexual abuse. We’ll give a brief history, then get an idea of its current prevalence. Finally we’ll take a look at some of its effects on victims.

At the end of each chapter of this book we will answer frequently asked questions and offer a call to action. This topic may trigger some, so proceed with caution. We will do our best to be redemptive and hopeful while addressing one of the most disturbing of topics.

DEFINITION

Licensed mental health counselor Catherine Quiring defines sexual abuse as “unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making

2 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/february/ravi-zacharias-rzim-investigation-sexual-abuse-sexting-rape.html>

3 *Ibid*

threats, or taking advantage of victims who do not give their full consent.”⁴ The most extreme forms of this are the sexual abuse of children, who are not old enough to give consent, and forcible abuse or rape of a child or adult. Besides those extreme forms, the use of a power advantage to coerce, manipulate, or lure another into sexual activity can also constitute forms of sexual abuse.

Jesus alluded to this abuse of power when He said, “If you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone hung around your neck” (Mark 9:42, NLT). The phrase “little ones” is *micros* in the original Greek and can mean anyone with less power than another. This would include not only children, but also new converts, who often see a halo on all spiritual leaders. Essentially, Jesus warned, “Spiritual leader, if you take advantage of a spiritually vulnerable person, you deserve capital punishment by drowning.”

Many presentations of church-related abuse focus on child abuse. This presentation includes abuse of adult congregants. Even adults can be subject to the abuse of power, particularly religious power. It may not be a state crime for a member of the clergy to lead or pressure an adult congregant into a sexual relationship (although it is in some states!), but it is an egregious spiritual crime in God’s eyes. At its core, abuse is the exploitation of the weak by the strong, regardless of the age or other characteristics of the parties involved.

A variety of terms are used for sexual abuse in a church context. We list them here.

Clergy Sexual Misconduct refers to any sexualized behavior on the part of a spiritual leader toward someone they are ostensibly leading.

Sexual Harassment refers to unwelcome sexual advances, request for sexual favors, or verbal harassment of a sexual nature.

4 <https://www.cqcounseling.com/specialties/sexual-abuse>

Clergy Sexual Assault generally refers to an isolated incident of an unwanted sexual encounter.

Clergy Sexual Abuse or Sexual Abuse by Clergy (the term we most often use) is used to describe a pattern of repeated unwanted sexual encounters, often using manipulative tactics.

Power Abuse refers to using one's greater professional or positional power to lure, coerce, or deceive a person into compliance.

Sexual Exploitation refers to using greater power to exploit another person sexually.

Sexual Violence refers to physical sexual assault of any kind including rape, groping, and molestation.

Rape is a type of sexual assault involving non-consensual intercourse or other forms of penetration.

HISTORY

Clergy sexual misconduct and abuse are as old as the hills—the Bible tells us so. The priest Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas “lay with the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting” (1 Samuel 2:22). The story of the Levite's concubine began with a priest engaging in egregious, although tolerated, sexual misconduct with a concubine (Judges 19-21). Old Testament scholar Richard Davidson says eight lines of evidence have convinced him that David power-raped Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11).⁵ Simon the Pharisee very likely abused the sinful woman many believe to have been Mary Magdalene (Luke 7:36-50).

Although it was likely rampant, the evidence of sexual abuse by clergy in the church age is scant. This may be because anciently, secular law did not protect women and children, so it was not considered a reportable

5 *The Flame of Yahweh*, p. 523.

crime. Thankfully, more and more has been said about this evil in the last several decades.

In 1989, while Christians seeking counseling still typically went to their pastors, *Newsweek* released an article about the use of pastoral counseling as a way of sexually abusing congregants.⁶ The Pope issued his first public statement about sexual abuse by Catholic clergy in 1993, and an ad-hoc committee published a three-part manual between 1994 and 1996.⁷

In 2002, the investigative journalism team of the *Boston Globe* released a damning report on abuse and coverup on the part of the Catholic archdiocese.⁸ The John Jay College Report, comprehensively covering abuse in the Catholic Church, came out in 2004. In 2019, the *Houston Chronicle* released a report on 700 pastors accused of abuse over 20 years in the Southern Baptist Convention.⁹ In 2020, *Christianity Today* published an article in response to a report on the late apologist Ravi Zacharias' sexual abuse of multiple women.¹⁰

The global, charismatic Hillsong Church came into the spotlight next with the release of the documentary *Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed* in 2022. The series reveals how Hillsong's founder and senior pastor Brian Houston stepped down after internal inquiries revealed a pattern of misconduct and coverup. This came after Houston fired Hillsong New York celebrity pastor Carl Lentz for "moral failures."¹¹ Ranin Karim, with whom Lentz had had an affair, told her story in 2020 on "Good Morning

6 <https://therevealer.org/a-history-of-sex-abuse-in-the-protestant-imagination/>

7 <https://www.crusadeagainstclergyabuse.com/htm/AShortHistory.htm>

8 <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/special-reports/2002/01/06/church-allowed-abuse-priest-for-years/cSHfGkTlrAT25qKGvBuDNM/story.html>

9 <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/Southern-Baptist-sexual-abuse-spreads-as-leaders-13588038.php>

10 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/september/ravi-zacharias-sexual-harassment-rzim-spa-massage-investiga.html>

11 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/29/us/hillsong-church-scandals.html>

America.”¹² All told, the Hillsong world involved power abuse, financial corruption, a frat-house culture, and sexual escapades all carefully concealed behind beautiful music and trendy fashions.

These are just a few examples of high-profile revelations of church-related abuse scandals, but they give us a taste of the underbelly of evil lurking beneath crosses and robes. They also give us a sense of the increasing outrage against them, and the public will to hold them accountable.

PREVALENCE

Sexual abuse is tragic fact of life. One in three girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused by the age of 18.¹³ One in three girls and one in four boys will experience sexual violence at some point in their lives.¹⁴ The American Medical Association says a woman is assaulted every 45 seconds.¹⁵ These numbers give us a sense of how dangerous the world is to the sexually vulnerable.

Unfortunately, the church can also be dangerous. Because congregants believe clergymen hold the keys to the kingdom, they have even greater sway than secular doctors, teachers, and coaches. Pastors and priests possess a power over people—probably too much power, and we should all focus on Jesus more and His representatives less—but let’s be honest about their ability to inflict on the vulnerable deep and almost irreparable wounds.

CATHOLIC VS PROTESTANT CHURCHES

A 2018 Pennsylvania grand jury report, which only covered six of the eight Roman Catholic dioceses in Pennsylvania, said that over 300 priests sexually molested more than 1000 boys and girls for more than six decades. The Philadelphia archdiocese’s grand jury report in 2005 outed over

12 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/29/us/hillsong-church-scandals.html>

13 <https://www.cdc.gov/features/sexualviolence/index.html>

14 <https://caringwell.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/SBC-Caring-Well-Report-June-2019.pdf>

15 *Ibid*

60 priests involved in sexually abusing children.¹⁶ The John Jay College Report found that since 1950 almost 4500 clergy perpetrators abused at least 10,000 victims.¹⁷

Some of the features of Catholicism, including the sexual frustration of celibacy, the godlike status of priests, and the secret-sharing of the confessional booth, contribute to the sexual abuse problem. But the hierarchical nature of the church makes sexual abuse ironically easier to track.

In contrast, sexual abuse in Protestantism, with its decentralized administrations and non-denominational churches, is more difficult to track. However, insurance companies' records of payouts for abuse cases can help give us a sense of the prevalence of sexual abuse in Protestantism. John Thoburn, author of *Clergy Sexual Misconduct*, says that 10-14% of pastors have had sexual contact with a non-spouse, 30% admit inappropriate sexual behavior, and 15% admit being addicted to pornography. He says the average congregation of no more than 700 people will have seven survivors of clergy sexual misconduct.¹⁸

A 2018 paper reporting on sexual abuse in Protestantism utilized a database of 326 cases to develop an abuse profile. The authors concluded that:

The overwhelming majority of offenses were contact offenses that occurred on church premises or at the offender's home, and that most offenders were white male pastors or youth ministers who were approximately 40 years in age.¹⁹

16 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338414191_Clergy_Abuse_What_Is_to_Be_Done

17 https://www.bishop-accountability.org/reports/2004_02_27_JohnJay_original/exec.pdf

18 <https://www.amazon.com/Clergy-Sexual-Misconduct-Prevention-Intervention/dp/0983271305>

19 <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/1/27>

The Catholic profile differs in that possibly more than half of priests are gay.²⁰ Notably, the victims of child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy are 81% male, most of them falling in the 10-15-years-old category, whereas victims in Protestantism are more often female.²¹

UNDERREPORTING

One of the phenomena abuse responders encounter is underreporting. In order to understand the problem, let's take rape reporting as an example. The FBI says that false reports of rape range between two and 10 percent.²² The Bureau of Justice admits that only 35% of assaults are reported.²³ The point here is that people lie about sexual violence, but more people never tell about it. There are far more hidden assaults than fabricated assaults.

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) reports that out of every 1000 sexual assaults:

- 310 are reported to the police (31%)
- 50 lead to arrest (5%)
- 28 will result in a felony conviction (2.8%)
- 25 will be incarcerated (2.5%)²⁴

The number of assaulters who actually do time for their crime is about 2.5 percent. False allegations can ruin a life. We will discuss this at length in this book. But let's bear in mind that our bigger problem is not the circulating of lies about abuse; it's the suppression of truth about it.

20 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/17/us/it-is-not-a-closet-it-is-a-cage-gay-catholic-priests-speak-out.html>

21 <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4251&context=doctoral>

22 <https://web.archive.org/web/20180101025446/https://icdv.idaho.gov/conference/hand-outs/False-Allegations.pdf>

23 <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>

24 <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>

EFFECTS

Sexual abuse history predicts a host of psychological and physical problems, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), self-harm, substance abuse, eating disorders, sleep disorders, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, pelvic disease, immune problems, and, of course, sexually-transmitted diseases.²⁵

Can you imagine how sexual abuse by clergy could worsen the already-devastating effects of sexual abuse? The perpetrator represents God! They hold the hearts of the congregation in their hand! They then uncoil their diabolical desires for the unfortunate victim, ushering that person into a dark chamber of horrors few people will believe exists. An abusive clergyperson violates and exploits the tender care and close, protective bond which should exist between shepherd and flock.

Diane Langberg, champion of church-connected sexual abuse survivors, tweeted, “Abuse damages a survivor’s thinking...Such beliefs as ‘I am worthless, God is not good, love does not exist, and no one can be trusted’ are very strong.” Pamela Cooper-White said it this way: “I have witnessed...the many parallels between sexual abuse by clergy and incest and intimate-partner violence...Such parallels are particularly apt, because the church is so often portrayed as family.”²⁶ Steven Edward de Weger said, “Religious professionals have even more power and contexts with which to abuse others than their secular counterparts because of the ‘God Factor,’ and when they do, the effects are, therefore, even more harmful.”²⁷

When the family of faith, designed by God to be a safe refuge from the warzone of this world, instead becomes a place of secret violence, an unfathomably heinous sin inflicts uniquely dreadful wounds. Only a God

25 <https://www.rainn.org/effects-sexual-violence>

26 <https://dokumen.pub/the-cry-of-tamar-violence-against-women-and-the-churchs-response-2nbsped-978-0800697341.html>

27 <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/5/393>

of perfect justice and mercy knows how to right this wrong. It is our aim and prayer to cooperate with Him in that endeavor.

THE CALL

“The Lord executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed” (Psalm 103:6). But He wants to execute that justice, at least in some measure, *through us*. We may think there are special, qualified people always standing by to handle these cases; that we can stand back and watch. Well, think again. Listen to Jesus’ appeal: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matthew 5:37). The Lord commands us, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute; speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8-9). As we see the fallout of abuse all around us, we ask, “If not us, who?”

Keep reading to learn more about how to become effective in this sacred work.

FAQS

Despite the very real prevalence and effects of sexual abuse by clergy, questions arise as to its nature. We will identify and answer a few of the most common questions here.

Why don't more women fight sexual assault?

When hearing about a sexual encounter in which the woman did not resist, some say, “Oh, well then it was consensual! She wanted it!” Well, not so fast. Let’s take in a few facts of human psychology before we conclude that an absence of physical resistance means consent.

First we need to establish that underaged children, because of immature brain development, are not capable of informed consent and should never be held responsible in any way, shape, or form for sexual contact with an adult. Even once they pass the adult threshold, age should be considered in determining the level of responsibility of the parties. An 18-year-old who had “consensual” sex with her 40-year-old pastor may not technically be underage, but the severe age-related power imbalance,

as well as the immaturity of the 18-year-old, should be heavily weighted. It was abuse the day before she turned 18; is it suddenly not abuse the day after? Let's think in principles, not letter-of-the-law.

We should also note that some perpetrators, aware of age-of-consent laws, operate this way: *Do all the grooming before she turns 18; then when she comes of age, make your first attempt. By then she'll be putty in your hands and it will look like a relationship between consenting adults.*

In addition, women who don't want sex with a man who is almost always bigger and stronger must face the very real possibility of physical violence. Let's introduce Freeze, the very well-documented cousin of Fight and Flight. Women faced with the possibility of sexual assault often experience this "tonic immobility." That is, they freeze like a deer in the headlights, unable to move.

Some of the reasons for this paralysis may be the fear of retaliatory violence. If women fight back, their odds of being raped are cut in half, but their odds of being injured are raised by 10 percent.²⁸ Think about this carefully: He grabs her and unzips. She knows that resistance may mean injury or death. She chooses to submit to the rape. Can we blame her? Even if she believes she can reduce her chances of being raped by fighting back, she still faces a pick-your-poison dilemma.

Sometimes the threats are purely psychosocial. She knows that if she refuses his advances, he will shame her, cut her off, slander her, reject her, and make sure she suffers for bruising his ego. Take those dynamics into a church context. A struggling believer may fear being cut off from God Himself. Typically an abusive pastor will toggle between seduction and threat, one minute drawing her in with, "It's okay, we have such a special love! God gave us this relationship!" and the next minute thundering, "Submit to me or go to hell!" The religious overtones augment the abuser's power to manipulate and intimidate.

28 <https://www.pbs.org/kued/nosafeplace/studyg/rape.html#:~:text=Some%20experts%20suggest%20a%20woman,is%20no%20one%20correct%20response.>

Another phenomenon we must wrestle with is Stockholm Syndrome. The term came from the story of bank robbers in Stockholm, Sweden, holding captive and effectively brainwashing the employees to the point that, in the end, the employees developed a kind of trauma bond with their captors.

The point is that physical resistance isn't the only indicator of non-consent.

Shouldn't she say no anyway, even if she will pay a price?

In a perfect world, she should resist. And certainly we should encourage this. Some say that if the perpetrator makes it difficult to say no, they have effectively taken away all consent. This is not precise. Saying no is still possible even when difficult.

We should encourage assertiveness in vulnerable populations. Many women need help being more assertive, and would benefit from coaching and training in this regard. There is, however, a difference between victim-blaming and survivor training. We should not blame victims who submitted because they thought they had no choice, but we should at the same time teach potential victims to say no in no uncertain terms. This can be a hard balance to strike.

Church can become a culture where protectors hearing a victim's cry rush in to provide aid and support. In Jewish law, a city-dwelling, engaged woman who had sex with another man would be stoned unless she cried out (see Deuteronomy 22:23-24). Why? Because if she screamed within earshot of her brothers, uncles, and father, they'd come running to protect her. Israel valued each woman and each womb as the potential carrier of the Messiah. They protected the health and purity of their daughters, sisters, and nieces with their lives. The law was read every seven years in the hearing of all Israel (see Deuteronomy 31:9-13), so the community knew the plan. The message was: "Girl, if a man assaults you, scream your head off. We'll come running!"

If the same scenario occurred in the countryside where none could hear, the man would be stoned but not the woman (verses 25-57). In that case,

she did not refuse the protection because there was none. The point is that we should help the vulnerable know their rights, creating a culture of protection in the church. Women will more likely cry out (i.e. report assault) if they know they will be heard.

What if a spiritual leader has physically consensual sex with a subordinate?

A good way to summarize this situation is to say that sexual intimacy with a subordinate in a ministry context is always abuse of the *office* and often abuse of the *individual*. What this means is that, without exception, the pastor who has sex with a non-spouse has violated their high calling and the trust invested in them. In addition, the power advantage possessed often means this clergy abused, at least in the sense of power abuse, the congregant.

This is considered “often” abuse because in rare circumstances the power possessed by a congregant equals or exceeds the pastor’s power. If a 35-year-old wealthy congregant who pays most of the pastor’s salary sets their sights on seducing a newbie 25-year-old first-time pastor, they create some muddy waters. We must deal in principles and work carefully, case-by-case. Assumptions are unhelpful and even harmful when dealing with some of the most complex of situations.

In the interest of helping with this, we offer the Spectrum of Abuse assessment on page 115.

Power imbalances can be very hard to pin down. The point is that we must address them in order to discern levels of consent. This background and analysis will be useful in assessing and applying the materials in the following chapters.

DISCUSSION/JOURNALING QUESTIONS

What kind of emotions do you feel when you think of “little ones” being harmed by powerful, religious figures? How have you/can you channel those emotions into righteous action?