

From There to Here and Surviving

By Janene Powell

Until those last six months, I had it all. I had four healthy children, my oldest daughter a missionary, my middle daughter a biology major at a Christian college, my youngest daughter a junior in high school, and my son was doing well in sixth grade. My husband and I were in our fourth year of working in the college ministry and the ministry was showing growth. The college age young adults were what we considered to be our mission field.

There were several other local congregations that were working together with us to reach out to this age group. I worked at the church office and was allowed to work around my children's school schedule. I was an assistant to the minister of single adults. The work was extremely rewarding. I worked on area-wide singles retreats, single-parent seminars, church-wide mission trips, outreach projects, visitation, class leadership programs, and many other projects. I thrived on this work: God's work. I communicated with people from our church and with people from other congregations all over the state of Texas. This was the work I had always wanted to do! Family, church, community, mission, friends, and career – I had it all!

So what happened! How did I get from having it all to losing it all? How did I get from there to here? Only on this side of the nightmare do I have the slightest understanding of what went wrong. While I walked through it, I didn't have a clue I was headed down a dark path to a bottomless pit.

For the first four years that I worked at the church office, everything seemed great. Eight months after starting my work there I was assigned to work with Jim, the minister of single adults. I still remember the day he stood at the opening of my cubby and said, "So, we'll be working together now." I was a bit nervous, but that soon went away. He was good to work with. We were a team doing "kingdom business" together. I considered my work more of a calling than a job. For four years everything was as it should be.

Then, in January of 2002, Jim changed the rules. He began hugging me more. He began taking me out to lunch and telling me how important and special I was to him. This was all different than the way it had been for the first three years and four months we had worked together. He said he was going to make more time to spend with me. My husband was traveling more with his new job. He was staying out late with clients and his new boss on occasion. Jim was having issues in his home and we began talking more about his personal problems.

Slowly, but surely, Jim drew me to him, and I became more emotionally reliant on him. The relationship became more and more physical. I was lonesome and I longed for a close friend. He wanted more. I needed the reassuring words that he was so good at giving. My home was a troubled place now. I thought the only place I could find peace was with him.

We went to each other's houses a few times while our spouses were out of town. The attachment to him grew even stronger. But I knew this was not right. I wanted so badly to go back to the way it was. I wanted to keep the good and get rid of the bad, but I was emotionally addicted to him now. How would I break this addiction?

I confessed to my husband what had been going on and asked him not to tell the elders and not to ruin Jim's career. He agreed not to ruin his career, but stated he was going to talk to him. So, the three of us had lunch together. Jim promised not to see me alone anymore. He would break that promise before the day was over.

Even being on the edge of losing everything that I loved, I knew I had to do something. I counseled with an elder. I told him everything but the minister's name. He said he didn't know what would happen once he knew the name.

I agonized for over a month. Then I found out that I was not the first woman Jim had exploited. This was a pattern for him. I was the second, maybe the third woman at this church. Then Jim confessed he had been with eight or nine other women before me! And if that wasn't enough, I also found out that his wife was campaigning to get me forced away from her husband.

So, when he wanted someone to be a close friend, he drew me to him while I was lonesome and vulnerable. But now, when his wife had caught on, he was ready to turn his back on me and let whatever was to happen be my problem.

My husband and I met with the elder on July 1st, and I told him the name of the minister I'd been seeing and what had happened. He told me not to go back to work.

The emotional trauma I had been through had taken its toll. I had to go into all day intensive group therapy for three weeks. There I found out about clergy sexual abuse and began to understand that I was a victim of Jim. As a minister, he was in a position of power and had used his power to gain what he wanted. I was out for two weeks. During that time, on August 9th, the church leaders officially took away the job that I had loved and told my husband and I that we could no longer work in the college ministry – the mission we had nurtured and loved. They told us that they had also let Jim go from his job. In other words, they had put us on an even field of responsibility. Following that meeting, the church leaders cut off communication with us.

It was devastating to lose everything that was so important to my life. I lost my job and my ministry. My friends “couldn’t believe I’d do such a thing.” Do what? Be abused by a minister? I found out that church people could forgive a person off the street of certain sins easier than they could a long time Christian. I lost my church. I couldn’t stay at the church where he was and where people would turn their backs to me and walk the other way. I went from having it all to losing it all in six months.

I had to go back to half-day group therapy for five more weeks. I learned that I was still a valued person in God’s sight no matter what others thought of me. What others thought of me was their decision. I could not control anyone else’s thoughts but my own.

God blessed me with a devoted husband, a knowledgeable doctor, medication, a counselor who understands CSA and believes in me, and lots of information and books to help me heal. I have to do it without the familiar people and church I had been with for so long, but by the grace of God I march ahead.

I have two messages to all that read this testimony:

1. Don’t believe those who would tell you that you and your abuser are on an even playing field. That is simply not true. The clergy are in a position of power. It is their responsibility to keep the vulnerable safe and not take advantage of them.
2. Your life is not over. You may be like me and have to start all over again, but life is not over. Peter was Jesus’ disciple doing His work. Then he denied Him, but he repented and still went on to do His work again.

Hurting, not wanting to start over, wishing you could go back and change things, wanting to talk to people and change their minds about how they see you, being lonesome, wanting to die, depression, crying all the time, feeling misunderstood, needing understanding, all these emotions and more, I understand. You are not alone, **YOU ARE NOT ALONE** and you need never be! Unfortunately, clergy sexual abuse has happened to more than just one of us. Unfortunately, it will probably happen again. Contact the people at Tamar’s Voice. Just remember, you are not alone!