Abuse & The Church: Christianity, Spirituality, & Healing

"..savage wolves from your own group will come in among you, not sparing the flock." ACTS 20:29B

Church attendance and participation in a religious community are an important part of life for many of us. Religious involvement can provide individuals, families, and communities with a vital source of support and spiritual strength. However, when abuse occurs within the religious context, it can trigger a crisis of faith as well as emotional trauma for the abused individual. Trauma can occur in any environment including in religious spaces such as churches. Likewise, the abuses that cause such trauma can be perpetrated by anyone, even priests, pastors, and ministers. When such abuse is made public, religious communities may resist accepting the unsavory truth about their leaders which, in turn, creates tremendous pressure on the sufferers of religious abuse to remain silent about their victimization. While such victimization can happen in any religious community, we focus here on abuse that happens specifically within Christian churches.

Spiritual abuse occurs when any spiritual thing that should always be used for good (e.g., one's religious position, a theological premise, the scriptures) is instead used to harm, exploit, diminish, manipulate, or cover up. Examples of spiritual abuse include: sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy; the emotional manipulation of parishioners to give or tithe more money to the church than they can afford; or pressuring a person to remain in a marriage of domestic violence due to religious beliefs. Often, spiritual abuse is the attempt of a religious group or an individual in a position of religious authority to gain control over a person. A unique element of spiritual abuse is that because it involves the sacred, its impact can also involve an existential crisis: it can feel like God allowed or even condoned the abuse. As a result, some people who have experienced this are left with a sense that things held sacred have been defiled.

If you have suffered abuse in our religious community, first - know that there is hope for safety and healing. It is also important to know that the healing process can be complex, and take many forms. For example, it may involve unpacking layers of trauma and dealing with questions such as: "If I could be deceived this way, what else am I deceived about?"; "What do I believe about God?"; "Is this God's fault?" All of this can be scary, but these feelings are common and normal. Next, consider reading up on and viewing resources that address religious and spiritual abuse. Finally, it can be helpful to connect with a mental health professional. There are many therapists who are persons of faith who are committed to helping you heal. However, some abuse survivors may prefer a helping professional who is not connected to the faith community of their abuser(s). In this case, therapists unassociated with a religious community can also be helpful.

If you seek a new faith community in the aftermath of abuse, then there are helpful things to consider in your search: (1) Seek a faith community that demonstrates an understanding of the prevalence and impact of trauma and that strives to foster healing and safety. (2) Look for churches committed to educating their leaders, volunteers, and

members about how to effectively respond to trauma. (3) Look for churches that are transparent in enacting policies and processes that ensure oversight of staff and clergy to prevent abuse. These things can safeguard leaders against acting in abusive ways. No matter which path you take, the healing paths are those where you will find persons and communities dedicated to an ongoing process to love thy neighbor well. For more information on interpersonal trauma, violence, and abuse, *see* here. To learn about collective trauma, *see* this. To learn more about how to heal and thrive, *go to* here.