How Childhood Sexual Abuse Affects Adult Survivors’ Images of God: A Resource for Pastoral Helpers

Carol J. Cook, Ph.D and Cindy L. Guertin, MAMFT

Introduction
Pastoral helpers – clergy, lay ministers, and pastoral counselors – are in a unique position to explore how the experience of childhood sexual abuse impacts adult survivors’ understandings of and relationship to the Divine. Therapy and other community resources are useful in addressing many consequences of abuse. However, these services may or may not recognize the importance of a survivor’s spirituality.

This article strives to better inform pastoral caregivers about how survivors view God. It seeks to enable caregivers to be more attentive to the ways that images of God can either trigger memories of abuse or facilitate healing in worship and pastoral care conversations. It seeks to help caregivers avoid the potential and unintended misuse of certain God images and/or to find ways for hurtful images to be transformed as a means of spiritual healing.

Prevalence
Thirty-nine million is the conservative estimated number of adults in the United States who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CMRPI, 2007). “But child abuse doesn’t happen in my congregation,” many will contend. While we want to believe that this is true, research reveals that sexual abuse is prevalent in every community regardless of culture, socioeconomic status, race, religion, and geographic region. Someone well known to the victim, most often a family friend or relative perpetrates the majority of sexual abuse. In fact, data from the Abel and

---

1 Carol Cook, Ph.D. is a professor at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and Cindy Guertin, MAMFT, is a therapist in private practice in Seattle, WA. Sacred Spaces: The e-Journal of the American Association for Pastoral Counselors (2010), vol.2
How Childhood Sexual Abuse Affects Adult Survivors’ Images of God

Harlow Child Molestation Prevention Study and the 1999 U.S. Census Statistical Abstract shows that the most common profile of a child molester is a married, educated, employed, religiously-identified white male. While it is impossible to get an accurate report of the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse due to the nature of secrecy and shame surrounding this issue, by age 18 it is conservatively estimated that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys is sexually abused, with numbers perhaps reaching closer to half the population (Flynn, 1995; NRCCSA, 1994).

What do these figures mean for the church? The numbers are not just statistics; they are the people we serve. Imagine: in the average Presbyterian congregation of 212 members, perhaps 40 or so people come to worship God with part of their identity being survivors of childhood sexual abuse. These are people sitting in the pews worshiping a God whose image they mediate and filter through the lens of personal experiences of abuse. Although survivors may not be able to reveal their pain, they are very much in need of sensitive pastoral care.

**Developmental considerations: results of empirical research**

Childhood is a critical time for the development of the God image, influenced largely by one’s experiences with caretakers in relation to forming a sense of self (Fowler, 2001; Rizzuto, 1979; Stone, 2004). If trusted adults violate the emerging self through something as egregious as sexual abuse, the survivor’s image of God will likely be influenced by the experience. Studies show that childhood sexual abuse affects survivors’ lives and development in a multiplicity of areas throughout the lifespan. Since people’s perceptions of God are intertwined with self-

---

2 These traits don’t make a person more likely to abuse children; rather they reflect the most common traits of men in the U.S. Census. Significant differences may only be found in gender and sexual orientation, where males are found to have a higher incidence of committing sexual abuse than females, and where, contrary to stereotypical images, child molesters are rarely, if ever, homosexual (Flynn, 1995).


Sacred Spaces: The e-Journal of the American Association for Pastoral Counselors (2010), vol.2
images, the God-image becomes an important resource in pastoral counseling for those who seek healing from childhood sexual abuse.

Multiple studies document the immediate and long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse, particularly as it impacts psychosocial functioning (Crisp, 2004; Flynn, 1995; Robinson 2000). Some of these suggest that sexual abuse has an adverse impact on identity development and the essential questions of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Who am I in relationship to others?’ However, few studies focus on the way that childhood sexual abuse impacts one’s spiritual identity which involves the question of ‘Who is God in relation to me?’ This is the case despite the sometimes substantial consequences sexual abuse has on a survivor’s perception of and relationship with God. One such study by Dorothy Hurley (2004) found that sexual abuse has a negative impact on spiritual functioning in three main areas: the sense of being loved and accepted by God, the sense of community with others, and trust in God’s plan and purpose for the future. In addition, Beth Crisp (2004) contends that survivors of sexual abuse often experience low self-esteem and low-self confidence, which may manifest in one’s relationship with self, with others, and with God. This may be the very reason a survivor seeks professional help. Crisp concludes that survivors tend to become open to discuss, perhaps tentatively, the effects of abuse on their spirituality when they find or are able to create a space where they can feel safe and understood.

Only a few quantitative research studies on the effects of childhood sexual abuse on survivor’s perceptions of God exist. Johnson and Eastburg (1992) found in their study that there were no differences between abused children’s and non-abused children’s concept of God. Kane et al. (1993) published an exploratory study comparing non-abused women to women sexually abused by a father-figure in childhood. While the study did not reach statistical significance in its sampling method, it found that among the women they interviewed, survivors were more
likely to feel that God was distant from them at some point in their lives, and were more likely to feel anger toward God. Survivors were also more likely than non-abused women to describe God using negative attributes and, in turn, to believe that God felt negatively about them. Reporting similar results, other studies found that abuse survivors were more likely to view God as wrathful or distant, less likely to perceive God as loving or kind, more likely to report problems relating to God, and more like to experience difficulty in accepting God’s love and grace (Crisp, 2004). While not specifically studying sexual abuse, Bierman (2005) found somewhat conflicting evidence suggesting that overall, childhood maltreatment has a positive effect on spirituality. The one significant exception to this general trend was that abuse perpetrated by fathers negative affected the survivor’s religiosity.

Carrie Doehring (1993) conducted a research study on the effects of traumatization on representations of God that yielded statistically significant results. Dividing the study sample into 4 groups based on the severity of childhood abuse suffered (no trauma, trauma, high trauma, and severe trauma), she compared the groups’ representations of God, noting significant results in three categories: God as loving, absent, and wrathful. Her research found that among women who experienced no trauma, some trauma, and high trauma in childhood, results for God representations were very similar, receiving high scores in describing God as loving and low scores in describing God as absent and wrathful. It was only when women had experienced severe trauma that God representations changed significantly; for this group God was described as low on a loving scale and high on the absent and wrathful scale. From her data, Doehring suggests that even though traumatization can lead to seeing God as distant, angry, and unloving, women who suffered abuse that caused moderate or high trauma are able to repress upsetting images of God as a self-protective mechanism. She theorizes that perhaps it is only when
trauma is severe and post-traumatic stress becomes complex that “the condemning, punitive, angry God may be associated with self representations of guilt, shame and fear and representations of the perpetrator as wrathful” (p. 136). Contrary to common assumptions in the pastoral literature, Doehring’s research suggests that sexual abuse does not affect a survivor’s ability to image God as loving, and present, and kind, except in the most traumatic cases when the abuse has been severe in nature and sustained over time.

These studies are helpful tools for understanding childhood sexual abuse and for providing information on how it affects survivors. However, empirical research has its constraints. For example, studies such as these can rely on preconceived categories and descriptions of a particular phenomenon, therefore limiting information to the researcher’s starting assumptions about the topic. Another way to approach and understand the phenomenon of childhood sexual abuse is to listen closely to the brave voices who dare speak of the horrors they survived to a society that largely regards their experiences as ‘unspeakable.’ Sadly, too often these survivor voices have been silenced again and again. First perpetrators silence them through power and control, then family and community members silence through disbelief or shame, and later people in helping roles silence them because they cannot bear to hold another’s pain or want to find answers without first listening. Sometimes the voices of survivors are silenced by clergy who refuse to believe that it can happen within the bounds of the church community. Ultimately, they can be silenced by theologies that marginalize the voices of victims in favor of institutional preservation, traditional doctrines, and metaphors for God that may inadvertently perpetuate abuse (Pattison, 1998).
Listen to survivors

Adult survivors of sexual abuse offer their gifts at great cost; the memories are painful and it takes courage to share this pain with others. The diversity of survivors’ voices has much to teach about the image of God. Church member and incest survivor Louise Garrison (1984) writes:

God the Father. Can I really love God the Father? If my own father was my molester, can anyone including God expect that I could love Him with all my heart and soul? Is it possible to love someone, something, or some other if the image is a reminder of my own father? My God is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all life. Some say God is the Father. Others say God is Mother or Spirit. The important message is that God will speak to us in our own imagery. (p.24)

Ordained minister and survivor of sexual abuse Beverly Dale (1994) writes of her teen survivor years:

The same God who helped me to survive was also in me, giving me the inner strength to rebel. Instead of a rescuer God intervening on my own behalf, there was an inner God empowering me, teaching me to say, “No!” (p.26)

Dale writes of her God image in the present as well:

...God has taught me to fly. God has lifted me like an eagle in the warm summer sunlight. I soar high above the scars of my childhood and sing with Isaiah: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not grow faint’ (40:31).” (p.27)

Theologian and abuse survivor Stephen Pattison (1998), as a child, found that Christianity reinforced his sense of badness and powerlessness before God:
God, the great parent who must be obeyed, appeared to be the guarantor of the [abusive] regime, ordaining the powers and institutions that be. . . Whenever one felt personally miserable, that was selfish and what one was supposed to do was think of the immeasurably greater suffering of Christ on the cross – that was real suffering and one should see one’s own unhappiness as a privileged but pale shadow of the suffering of the savior who died for the sins of people like me. (pp.41-42)

Later in life, Pattison discovered the power of resurrection:

Coming to life, feelings one’s real feelings, is a dangerous, difficult and unpredictable process … Encountering life, even in oneself, is truly frightening. There is a sense in which one is brought to life over one’s own dead body! (pp.43-44)

In her recovery process as a survivor of incest, pastoral theologian Nancy Ramsay (1998) writes:

I have come to imagine God’s love as fierce tenderness. Fierce tenderness is an image that highlights the relation of God’s love and justice. It is an image that locates God’s power in the service of God’s love. Fierce Tenderness defines God’s love as compassion. This is an image deeply rooted in scripture where God is described as our Creator who not only gives us life but whose life giving Spirit continues to be highly involved in our lives empowering us for love. . . (p.219)

Dorothy Allison (1998), survivor and novelist, writes about a character named Cissy, also a survivor:

The dark was female and God was dark. God was dangerous, big, frightening, mysterious and female. And blasphemous. Sometimes Cissy wished she could explain to Amanda how she thought about the divine. Not biblical but familial. Not Jehovah, but
Delia with her head thrown back and that raw soaring song pouring out of her open mouth. (p.276)

Incest survivor Joan Bryce Crompton (1999) writes:

Unable to bear my brokenness, I went along the path to the ancient oak tree the nuns had named Grandmother Oak, and curled beneath her branches. In times like this I had never been able to find God in church. Why should I? The institutionalized church, which could deal with everything from polishing brass to AIDS, could not bring itself to deal with survivors of abuse and violence….I prayed the best I could, but mostly felt the age-old wisdom of the oak, just as I had absorbed the grace so freely offered by my horses. (pp.36-37)

Anne Sexton (1975), in her poem *The Sickness unto Death*, writes:

God went out of me
as if the sea dried up like sandpaper,

…Someone brought me oranges in my despair
but I could not eat a one

for God was in that orange.

I could not touch what did not belong to me.

The priest came,

he said God was even in Hitler.

I did not believe him

for if God were in Hitler

then God would be in me….
In *The Color Purple* (1982), Alice Walker’s character Celie, an incest survivor, transforms her image of God during the process of her healing. Celie describes God as: “asleep,” “deaf,” and “a man [who] act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown” (p.175).

But later, after a pastoral conversation with her friend, Celie is able to reclaim God because she is given permission to see the Divine through a new lens. Her prayers to God were silenced, but she is able once again to pray: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (p.249).

**Learning from survivors: theological challenges for communities of faith and implications for pastoral care**

As can be heard here, survivors invite communities of faith to expand their God-language. Survivors’ words, images, and stories give caregivers the opportunity to enhance their theological scope and understanding of who God is and how God functions. By listening to how certain God-images invoke pain while others promote healing, pastoral professionals can learn how to use (and avoid misuse of) God-images as a resource for healing for survivors of sexual abuse.

The voices of survivors begin to paint a picture of how sexual abuse in childhood affects their image of God. As they show, there is no singular response to abuse and no “right” way to image God for the survivor. For many survivors, God is not just absent or present, close or distant, loving or unkind, but beyond traditional categories of description. Louise Garrison (1984) writes, “… I have found a new freedom that comes from experiencing God – a God who comes to all of us in whatever form we need and in whatever place we happen to be” (p. 24).

Surviving abuse experiences provides an intimate and privileged knowledge of God that not all, but many persons have.
For example, listening to survivors helps others appreciate that the image of God within the survivor is vulnerable to abuse, suffers with and in the abused child, and is transformed by that traumatic and oppressive experience. Those who experience sexual abuse know profoundly the vulnerability and rape-ability of the human body. The notion of *imago Dei* suggests that God embodies vulnerability and that God, too, contains an element of abuse-ability. Images of God and self intertwine. For some this results in a conviction that

the fundamental difference between God and humans is that ‘he’ is good and they are bad. This plays in well with abused people’s sense that they are justly abused; they must be, or have done something terribly bad and so deserve contempt and punishment.

(Pattison, 1998, p.47)

In the midst of such deep relational betrayal, other survivors are able to reclaim a belief in the trustworthy and empowering compassion of God, a theme found in Psalm 23 (Ramsay, 1998).

It appears that the God of childhood dies as the *imago Dei* within the survivor is violated. The image of the Divine sometimes awakens in new forms beyond the anthropomorphized, patriarchal God of traditional theologies. There is a sense from many survivors’ stories that God has somehow participated in the survivor’s experience of the abuse and has been changed by it. This may mean that God takes on other forms—feminine and nature imagery emerge. God may be imaged in explicitly Christian terms or with more ambiguous Divine metaphors. Either way, many survivors seem to be able both to question their knowledge of God and to claim what they know of God assuredly and intimately. Their belief in God co-exists alongside the unanswered questions.

Most research on abuse and pastoral writing about abuse begins with the assumption that a survivor’s imaging of God is inevitably disordered and therefore untrue. Survivors’
knowledge of God may indeed be painful, and perhaps even cause psychological stress to the survivor or to those who bear witness to their pain through ministries of listening. But one should not conclude that because they have been sexually abused, survivors cannot comprehend the nature of God. Perhaps survivors are able to claim a special knowledge of God. Listening to the voices of the marginalized to learn something new about God is not about perverting the ‘true image.’ Theology generated from survivors’ perspectives is not distorted by abuse any more than the Reformed perspective is distorted by privilege, maleness, and heterosexism. Rather, these voices reveal a theology that comes from deep within a human experience that is intrinsic to an abuse survivor’s story and personhood.

At the same time, like any experience, sexual abuse can sometimes distort healthy God images. There is room for some survivors to move from damaged images of God to reclaimed and renewed traditional God imagery. The effects of sexual abuse on the survivor’s image of God can indeed have negative consequences on a person’s self-perception, religiosity, and spirituality. Ramsay reminds readers that “a particularly insidious consequence of sexual abuse is the distortion it creates in a child’s ability to imagine God’s love as including him or her” (p. 225).

On the one hand, the biblical and Christian heritage affirms that God speaks and the community learns something new about who God is and how God moves in the world from experiences of oppression and abuse. Grovijahn (1998) suggests that survivors’ bodies provide a new location from which to do theology “which not only invents new God-language and imagery, but transforms survivor voice into theological discourse” (p. 33). On the other hand, the experiences of survivors invite all to re-vision components of classic Christian theology so that it ceases to be complicit with the forces of domination and abuse (Pattison). These Sacred Spaces: The e-Journal of the American Association for Pastoral Counselors (2010), vol.2
components include depicting God primarily as a perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful superfather. This image can leave God’s “children” feeling powerless and with a sense of violated personal boundaries. An eschatology that emphasizes secrecy and encourages escape into an alternative fantasy world can encourage hopeless passivity and a sense that nothing can improve the current situation. Atonement theology that focuses on salvation through Christ’s suffering and victimhood can be heard by some to legitimize abuse, exalt passive acceptance, and undermine the importance of personal agency.

As Pattison suggests, what is needed is a theology that encourages abused people to look upon their frailty and sense of shame with compassion. Many persons, not just survivors of sexual abuse, need a theology that gives them permission to protest their pain, to assert themselves, and to be angry when their boundaries are violated. An authentic theology of hope can empower believers to act on their own and other’s behalf rather than hoping for an outside rescue that may never come.

**Working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse**

In addition to the theological reflections above, pastoral and secular counseling resources can provide pastoral caregivers with some specific guidance for working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Cynthia Crosson-Tower (2006) devotes a chapter to attending to adult survivors in her *A clergy guide to child abuse and neglect*, a summary of her earlier *Secret scars: A guide for survivors of child sexual abuse* (1988). She describes the ways these scars affect how survivors experience their place in the world and offers suggestions for facilitating potential healing. A summary of Crosson-Tower’s supportive responses includes

- Believe survivors’ stories, value their feelings, and offer a calm and supportive presence.
Regardless of your feelings about the survivor, the perpetrator, the nature of the incident; you must monitor your own immediate reactions.

Regardless of the amount of time that has elapsed; there are many reasons why someone who was abused did not disclose this violation as a child and why he or she may want or need to discuss it years later.

You must earn the survivor’s trust through care, consistency, and understanding.

- Do not criticize the survivor for the way they have handled their lives.
  - Do not criticize the perpetrator either; survivors may have warm as well as angry feelings toward those who have abused them.
  - Allow survivors to set their own pace in their telling of their story and their healing.

- Know your limits. You should not counsel beyond your level of expertise.

- Even if you have expertise, know your role and your boundaries.
  - Refer out to a trained therapist and/or a support group of other survivors.
  - You may agree to collaborate with the counselor with the survivor’s written permission; if you continue to meet with the survivor, these meetings should focus on faith issues.

- Empower survivors to take charge of their own decisions and their lives, but do not push them beyond their ability to do so.
  - The call for justice against the offender must come from the survivor.
  - This process requires a great deal of support, often legal counsel, and definitely a trained therapist.
• It may be necessary to discuss boundaries for appropriate sharing of this intimate information in congregational or social settings.

• Get support for yourself!
  
  o Listening to survivor’s stories of abuse can trigger various difficult feelings for the pastoral care-giver, seasoned as well as those new to helping professions.
  
  o These responses range from a sense of survivor’s guilt, re-surfacing of one’s own possible childhood wounds, shock, denial, anger, powerlessness, and confusion about sexual boundaries.
  
  o If any of these typical feelings become overwhelming, it is important to seek out your own therapy, supervision, or spiritual direction to maintain or replenish your own spiritual energy. (adapted from 2006, pp. 184-197)

Marie Fortune is a pioneer in bringing various manifestations of sexual violence to the attention of church leaders. The Faith Trust Institute (formerly the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence), which she founded, provides multiple resources for religious persons involved in caring for survivors of sexual abuse. These include workshops, consultations, books, and videos. Her 2005 revision of the groundbreaking Sexual violence: the unmentionable sin (1980) contains valuable information for persons seeking to better understand, theologically grapple with, and extend care to all involved in sexual abuse situations.

Several other books provide substantive theological reflection and practical interventions for pastoral caregivers as they minister to the survivors, perpetrators, and the larger family and congregational systems affected. These include The cry of Tamar: Violence against women and the church’s response by Pamela Cooper-White (1995), Violence against Sacred Spaces: The e-Journal of the American Association for Pastoral Counselors (2010), vol.2
Conclusion

The experience of surviving sexual abuse creates a rich context for God imagery, one that can expand our collective language and images of an expansive God. This challenges the church to loosen its grip on a narrow set of images of who or what God must be, and lets the survivors’ sacred truths broaden theological discourse, revise accepted doctrines, and inform worship practices. These truths can allow God the room to express God’s self uniquely through the experiences of different people.

Honoring survivors’ indigenous knowledge, taking a not-knowing stance, and relinquishing our own “expert” comprehension of God are necessary steps for pastoral caregivers. Caregivers must confront their own idols in order to be trusted helpers committed to stopping the cycle of abuse by refusing to silence voices from the margins. As Ramsay (1998) reminds us, “when we embody God’s fierce tenderness in the practice of ministry, we engage in compassionate resistance” against all forms of abuse and oppression (p. 219). The words of pastoral helper, Jamie Howison (1995), describe what may be the most helpful posture to take when engaging survivors of sexual abuse:

I’m learning to shut up when you invite me to sit with you on your dung heap. I’m not about to pretend that I will ever entirely give up trying to speak a meaningful word to
you, but when I do speak it will be out of the depths of the silence that I offer as my first
gift. It will be a word humbly offered, born of a deep respect for your experience and
your theology. It will be a word of companionship. You see, I can’t not speak. But first
I’ll be still and listen. (p.36)

References

theological sourcebook. New York: Continuum.


Basham, B. and Lisherness, S. (Eds.). (2006.) Striking terror no more: The church responds to
domestic violence. 2nd ed. Louisville: Bridge Resources.

Bierman, A. (2005). The effects of childhood maltreatment on adult religiosity and spirituality:
Rejecting God the father because of abusive fathers? Journal for the Scientific Study of
Religion, 44, 349-359.

Retrieved April 10, 2007 from

http://childmolestationprevention.org/pages/tell_others_the_facts.html

Coleman, M. A. The Dinah project: A handbook for congregational response to sexual


Sacred Spaces: The e-Journal of the American Association for Pastoral Counselors (2010),
vol.2


[http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/PUBLICATIONS/factsheet/fsabuse1.htm](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/PUBLICATIONS/factsheet/fsabuse1.htm)


Sacred Spaces: The e-Journal of the American Association for Pastoral Counselors (2010), vol.2


