

# Hating Girls

*An Intersectional Survey of Misogyny*

*Edited by*

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# Let Me Prey Upon You

*Sandy Phillips Kirkham*

This is Sandy Kirkham's story.<sup>1</sup> She has the extraordinary ability to take you deep into the inner world of what it is like to be sexually exploited by a trusted leader. Sandy will take you along her journey of healing and being transformed by her pain into a flourishing survivor. She is a resilient fighter who has found her voice.

Her story, you will discover, is not only powerful but will ask you to examine your own understanding of clergy abuse. Her story provides validation for survivors, hope for those recovering, and exposes some of the very unhealthy ways the institution of the church covers, conceals, distorts, and often further harms survivors assaulted or abused, who have experienced complex developmental trauma.

Society is approaching a tipping point around gender discrimination and sexual violence and churches will find themselves caught in the wave. We now know religious communities can be just as oppressive and hurtful as they are helpful. Change is coming because victims are finding and using their voices to reclaim their lives, calling out injustice and evil, and working to make our churches safer for those of all ages. Sandy Kirkham is one of those people. I hope you will allow yourself to be inspired and encouraged the same way I have been after reading her story.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Introduction

As an insecure, sixteen-year-old girl the church is where I should have felt welcome, happy, and most importantly, safe. Tragically for me, the church became a place of great harm.

In *Let Me Prey Upon You*,<sup>3</sup> I detail my account of how a charismatic youth minister preyed upon me by using the church, his position, and my trust in him

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1 Absam, LLC allows Sandy Phillips Kirkham to use material originally published in *Let Me Prey Upon You*, for this collection.

2 David Pooler, PhD, Foreword in *Let Me Prey Upon You* (Cincinnati, OH: Absam, LLC, 2019), 14.

3 Sandy Phillips Kirkham, *Let Me Prey Upon You* (Cincinnati, OH: Absam, LLC, 2019).

as my pastor. This betrayal left me broken, with a shattered faith and the ultimate shame of being blamed and removed from the church I loved. From our very first meeting, the new youth minister slowly and methodically turned the sacred relationship between a trusted spiritual leader into one of abuse: sexual, emotional, and physical. Grooming, manipulation, and gaslighting, common weapons of abusers, were all used to control me during a confusing and vulnerable time in my life.

After five long years his actions were discovered by church leaders. Instead of a punishment, he was given a going away party and simply moved to another church. I, on the other hand, was left to pay the price for his deeds. During a late-night meeting with two church elders I was told because of *my* behavior, I was to leave the church and as is all too often the case, I was neither his first victim nor his last.

Often church hierarchy and church doctrine do not permit women to serve in leadership roles. Based upon misinterpretation of the scriptures, women are to be submissive. We are told not to question their authority and are not given a voice or a seat at the table. The leadership structure within the church leaves victims of clergy abuse at the mercy of the men in charge. Too often the victim, as in my case, is blamed for leading the pastor astray or causing the offender to “fall into sin.”

Despite a successful and happy life as a wife, mother, and friend, I concealed my abuse from all those around me for twenty-seven years until a trigger forced me to face the truth. *Let Me Prey Upon You* details my journey of healing from innocent sixteen-year-old victim to survivor and advocate. Throughout my journey I sought justice and closure from both the pastor and my former church, despite efforts to stop me. Although I may not have found everything I was seeking, I found strength, satisfaction, and resolution through helping others. I hope my story of tenacity and courage will inspire you.

I share the following collection of excerpts initially published in my book *Let Me Prey Upon You*. I chose specific accounts to highlight the power and control an abuser has over his victim and the institution which covers up and allows the abuse to continue. Whether the abuse occurs once or over a long period of time, the consequences last a lifetime. The accounts I have chosen to share are only part of my story. Prior to each section I've written a brief introduction to provide context for each of the following narratives.

## 2 Queensgate—Next Exit

I begin with a trigger factor which set me on my journey of finding justice and healing. My story begins in 2004 on what would normally be a fun weekend visiting my daughter. However, this weekend would quickly force me to face a trigger deep within my past.

The lie had been hidden for so long, I hoped it might disappear. Some people claim that lies grow bigger with time, small white lies spawn bigger fibs and soon they grow to mammoth proportions, but maybe the opposite could be true. Maybe big lies could dissipate over time. I wanted to believe if a big lie was hidden and wasn't hurting anyone, it didn't matter, and its power was gone. Maybe, just maybe, there was a statute of limitations for the lies he told me.

It was a gorgeous spring day and the late afternoon sun peeked through the smoky haze covering the Tennessee mountains. My goal was to reach the Hampton Inn in Greeneville, Tennessee, a city I had never visited before, before dark. It was March of 2004, before cell phones, Google maps, and GPS were common navigational tools, and I had already made one wrong turn twenty miles back. I headed down I-75 from Cincinnati armed with my AAA Trip Tik and an oversized Atlas as my navigational system to reach my daughter's college golf tournament in Greeneville.

My husband and chief navigator, Bill, was unable to make the trip. I was left on my own. In spite of having a carefully mapped-out route, fear of becoming lost was ever present. I had never driven this route before. Throughout our married life, in the car and in general, I always counted on him to keep me on track. Once off I-75, the route would involve many turns, and a few back roads. I was getting a little nervous not having Bill with me.

My daughter's golf season was going well, and I, too, was content with this season of my life. I was 49, had a great husband, two kids in college, a suburban house, two well-behaved dogs, and good friends. Bill and I were enjoying our life as empty nesters and I could finally begin to focus more on myself. For years, the joys and chaos of children had taken precedent.

My CD player was loaded with my favorite songs, but I flicked on the radio instead. Reception was still good, and the oldies station played one of my favorite Beach Boys songs, "Good Vibrations." I bellowed along, until I saw the sign.

*Queensgate Exit 1 Mile.*

Queensgate? Queensgate? I had not thought of this place in years. My hands clenched the leather wrap of the steering wheel. I held on tight, trying not to waver an inch, to stay steady in the left lane. I focused on the semi in front of

me that was passing a maroon Buick. No matter what, I did not want to veer toward the exit lane for Queensgate.

*Queensgate? Queensgate? That's where he lives. Or does he still live there?* My mind spun into overdrive. How close am I to his church? To where he may live? Reminders of Queensgate flooded my head. My legs sought the grounding offered by the accelerator. Memories raced in. I could feel the car respond and surge forward. I told myself to stare straight ahead. Follow the semi. It held me in its wake. I kept repeating, "Keep going, just keep going."

*Queensgate ¼ Mile.*

Every muscle tightened when I saw the next sign. I felt his presence slither into the car. I felt him all around me. I felt his touch. I heard his voice. I smelled his musky aftershave. His presence smothered me. Almost as a wicked joke, The Carpenters' song, "Rainy Days and Mondays" came on the radio and took me back to 1972. I felt paralyzed, unable to turn off the radio. I felt him in the seat next to me, putting his hand on my right thigh. Tears rolled down my cheeks and onto my lap. I no longer heard the music, or had I turned it off? I didn't know.

*Queensgate Next Exit.*

Unable to breathe, gasping for air, I found myself in the right lane. I pulled off the expressway just prior to the exit. All I could do was sit there and sob. For the first time in almost three decades, I was consumed by pain.

My heart raced; my body shuddered with sobs as I lay my forehead on the steering wheel. I wrapped my arms around it, wishing this inanimate object would steady me and hug me back. I could not stop the waves of sorrow. I wanted the sadness, the memories, and the sound and smell of him to go away. I needed air. As I opened the car door, the rushing wind and the roar of semis brought reality to the moment. I stepped out of the car and held onto the hood to keep myself steady. Still, once I made it to the passenger's side, I collapsed next to the guardrail.

Why was this happening? Over the years there had been small reminders of him, reminders which stung like a slap on the wrist, but this was no small reminder. This was a huge reminder, a hard punch in my gut. It had been twenty-nine years since I last saw Queensgate, the place which reminded me of the Sandy I left behind, the Sandy I loathed.

I looked at my watch and realized I had to get back on the road to beat the setting sun. I forced myself to think about the golf tournament and told myself for the next forty-eight hours I would somehow put on my "mom face" and be strong. What would happen after that? Could I push these memories, these feelings, this pain back into the abyss and go on like before? Whatever this was, I was sure I couldn't ignore it any longer.

Arriving just before dark, I called Bill from the room to let him know I arrived safely. His steady voice calmed me, and I felt better. Grateful for a weekend full of activities and the joy at seeing my daughter, I managed to not let the events on the highway ruin the weekend.

Two days later I was back in the driver's seat. I desperately wanted to find a different route home, but my fear of getting lost and ending up in Queensgate, possibly in front of the church, made the known route a better option. I steeled myself as I drove along the freeway, gripping the steering wheel. For seven hours I could think of nothing other than what he had done to me. Even after I was well beyond Queensgate, the memories still closed in. I found myself quickly moving forward into my past.

For the next two weeks I was in a constant state of turmoil. I tried to keep it hidden from Bill. Whenever he left for work, I walked through the house, wringing my hands asking myself questions for which I had no answers. Why me? Why did he pick me? What did I do?

Each night Bill came home, and I would pretend everything was fine. I needed to be strong, to put on my "wife face." This was the exterior I had perfected over the years. One evening as Bill sat at the kitchen table to eat dinner, I poured him a glass of iced tea, as I did every night. I was about to join him at the table. I poured another glass of tea, then I poured another and then a fourth glass of tea. I began shaking, aware that I was losing my ability to function. Quickly, I poured the tea down the drain and set the glasses into the dishwasher. I glanced at Bill as he sat at the table reading the newspaper. He had not witnessed the four glasses of tea. Relief filled me, but I knew I needed help. I had to unload the secret threatening to crush me. I had to tell someone.

Then I heard *his* words, "Don't ever tell anyone. They will think you are lying and never believe you."

Who *would* ever believe my story? Who should I tell?

### 3 Youth Group/New Youth Pastor

As a teenager I was active and involved in my church. I had found a place of family and friendship and latched onto the relationships I found there. Just before I turned sixteen my church hired a new youth minister.

There was an unusual excitement among the adults with this new youth pastor's arrival. Hearing of the growth and enthusiasm Jeff Coulier had created in youth participation at his prior church in Tifton, Georgia, the elders were eager to have this vibrant, charismatic youth pastor on staff.



At the reception welcoming Jeff Coulier and his family after the Sunday morning service, Mr. Wilson, the senior pastor, made a point to introduce me to Jeff Coulier. "Jeff, I would like you to meet Sandy. She is one of our fine young people here and one of the leaders of our youth group. We call her Miss Sunshine because of her radiant smile." I was totally flattered by the compliments. "Miss Sunshine." I knew people saw me that way and it made me feel special and appreciated. I was touched that Mr. Wilson made the effort to single me out and introduce me to the new youth pastor. I was nervous. Reaching down, taking my hand, and smiling, Jeff Coulier said to me with just a hint of a southern drawl, "You do have a very pretty smile." Waiting for him to let go of my hand, I was surprised when he continued to hold onto it as he talked. Before he walked away Mr. Wilson said to Jeff, "She will be a big help to you in your ministry." I hoped I had made a good first impression.

From the beginning it was clear that Jeff Coulier was a different kind of pastor than our beloved Pastor Tom. Jeff was thirty years old, close to Tom's age, but he dressed and acted more youthful, wearing cutoff jeans and other current styles of the seventies. His blonde hair and sideburns were longer. We called him Jeff, instead of Pastor Jeff. He understood our jokes, kidded with us, knew our music, and talked sports with the guys. He drove his orange convertible vw to our high school football games. He introduced us to the poetry of Rod McKuen and the music of Neil Diamond.

It was not uncommon for Jeff to compliment women and girls on their appearance. A response of, "Thank You" would be followed by Jeff saying, with a smile, "Don't thank me darlin'. I had nothing to do with it." He could also be critical of someone's appearance, but usually in a disarming way. Once in a sermon he remarked, "I don't expect women to dress like the cupboard, but I don't want them dressing like Mother Hubbard either." Everyone laughed. When I came to youth group wearing my hair in pigtails, Jeff looked at me and began making oinking sounds while flapping his hands about his ears, "You look a little funny in those pigtails. Oink, oink." Several times after that, whenever he saw me, he made an oinking sound. It embarrassed me, but I laughed it off.

A few weeks after he arrived, I was at his house babysitting. After he came home, he asked me to go to his basement to listen to the song "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show" by Neil Diamond. After putting the record on the stereo, and in spite of the fact there were many other places to sit, he came and sat close to me on the couch. This felt odd. I sat there wondering what he wanted me to do or say? He asked me what I thought of the music. I didn't understand the lyrics. The whole thing seemed a little weird.

Jeff's behavior was so unlike anything Pastor Tom would have ever done, taking me to his basement alone and asking me about popular song lyrics.

I had not talked to any pastor about anything other than church and the Bible. This attention made me feel uneasy and unsure of myself, but it also made me feel special.

#### 4 Sweet Sixteen

One of my responsibilities as a youth group leader was to host Youth After Church meetings at my home. These meetings consisted of prayer, devotions, and singing. It was a time for faith and friendship.

December 1971, just six months after his arrival, a youth group meeting was held in my home. The meeting was full of worship, prayer, and song and was not unlike other youth group meetings. That is until the other teens had left, and I turned to see Jeff standing in the hallway. It was now just the two of us. He walked over to me, he looked at me and told me again how great the evening was. I felt so special. I was on cloud nine. Then he cupped my face in the palm of his hands and moved my head upward toward his. With his thumbs behind my ears, he brushed my hair away and he told me how much he loved me. Then he bent down and kissed me.

My thoughts raced as I wondered, *“What is he doing?” He just kissed me and not just on the cheek! This was a real kiss.* For a moment I was stunned. It was a soft, gentle kiss, almost innocent. It didn't seem wrong. Yet it didn't seem right either. I trusted him. I stood there for a moment, but it seemed like much more. I was afraid to move. I was trying to process what happened, unsure what to think, as he continued to compliment me and tell me how much he appreciated me.

Confused, it took me a second, but then I calmed myself with the thought, “This is my minister; this is Jeff. He wouldn't do anything he shouldn't do. He's just showing me how much he loves me and how happy he is the evening went so well.”

#### 5 Number A36D

Throughout the next year I continued to babysit at his home. His wife worked evenings which provided him the perfect opportunity to gain my trust and to exploit my love of the church. After the children were in bed he wanted to sit and talk to me about the Bible. He would give me books to read to help deepen my faith. The time he spent with me was not to

help me, but to groom me so he could reach his ultimate goal of having sex with me. He did, just after I turned seventeen.

I turned to walk down the hallway toward the family room when he stopped me again. Taking my arm, he led me to the living room where only light from the kitchen lit the room. There was no furniture there, with the exception of an old console stereo cabinet with four legs sitting on the thick gold shag carpeting. I wondered why we were going to the living room.

He put me on the floor near the stereo, laid on top of me and began kissing me as he put his hands beneath my blouse. Then he began undressing me. He had never done that before. It was happening so fast. I figured he would stop. *Surely, he would stop*, I told myself. He felt so heavy on top of me. No one had ever been on top of me like that. My heart raced with fear. Then I sensed he was *not* going to stop. His breath became heavy, almost as heavy as his body.

He repeatedly asked if I loved him and I answered yes, each time. I didn't know why he kept asking me that. Yes, I loved him, but was he asking me if I loved him a different way?

"You know I love you. You know that don't you?"

"Yes." It was all I could think to say.

With his head pressed against my neck, with his hot breath, he whispered, "You know I would never do anything to hurt you."

He pulled off my vest and unbuttoned my blouse. As he continued to undress me, he pushed me a little bit until my head was partially under the stereo. I tried to close my eyes and think of something else to block what was happening. I didn't know how to tell him to stop and, if I did, would he get mad? I was afraid to say anything. I didn't want to hurt him or make him mad.

*Just close your eyes*, I thought.

Eventually my head was almost completely under the stereo. Even though it was nearly dark in the room, I could see some of the numbers printed on the bottom of the stereo. There was an A, a 3, a 6 and then more letters. Some were hard to see but I kept trying to repeat the letters. I repeated them over and over and over again, as he pressed against me. A36DP, or was that an F? I repeated them again.

At one point as he touched me, I remember looking at those numbers and thinking, "I wonder why they call it a serial number with so many letters in it. It's really not a number." I just tried to think of anything else, anything except what he was doing to me. I don't remember how much time passed before he slid me from beneath the stereo and lifted me to my feet. I was still

partially clothed and thankful for that. He took my hand and pulled me to the stairs.

In a hypnotic, monotone voice, he kept repeating, "It will be okay. You know you can trust me. I love you."

I felt powerless and too scared to tell him no. Even though my body followed him up the steps, I wasn't sure how. I felt like I was in one of those horror movies where the girl stays crouched in a fetal position in the corner of a room as an attacker with a knife slowly approaches. She could jump up and run, yet all she does is remain there crying, whimpering, saying, "please, please don't." You want to stand up and scream at the movie screen, "Run! Do something! Don't just sit there!!! Run!" but she never moves. My head was telling me to run but my body felt frozen. It was scarier to say no than to follow him.

We reached the top of the stairs. As we entered the bedroom, the light was on and I hoped he would turn it off. He didn't.

## 6      **Playing the Field**

He reassured me this was God's will and I was to help him in his ministry. In God's eyes we were married. As the relationship continued, his obsessive, controlling, violent behavior, and threats became clear.

He dictated how I was to dress, the time I spent with my friends, what movies I could see. He forbade me to see the movie *the Exorcist*. Afraid to defy him, I didn't. When my best friend Chris had tickets to see the Carpenters in concert, she asked me to go. I was so excited. Jeff insisted I attend a function at church the same night. Chris, angry with me, took another friend. He began to isolate me from my friends, and especially Chris, by demanding more of my time, fearful I would tell her about "us." I promised him I would never tell her. This Jeff was a completely different person than the caring Jeff Coulier I had come to know over the past year.

His obsessive behavior resulted in telling me who I could date, when, and for how long. I would date a guy for a short time and without warning or reason, Jeff would tell me, "You need to stop seeing him, now. Break it off." I would. This happened so many times, but I didn't dare argue. I knew arguing was pointless. I feared making Jeff angry. Once I refused his demand not to see a certain boy who lived out of town or have any more correspondence with him. I lied to him and told him I was no longer writing to Kent and I would not see him again.

7      **Strike One**

During one of our “meetings” came the first moment I felt hopeless and trapped. I knew the consequences I would face if I were to ever expose him.

After having sex with me, he got dressed to leave. Just before reaching the door he looked at me and asked, “You did stop writing to Kent like I told you, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

With that, the back of his hand landed across my face, knocking me to the floor. Disoriented for a moment, I sat on the floor holding my face.

*“Get up!!”*<sup>4</sup>

I didn’t move.

“How stupid do you think I am?” *“Now get up! I said to get up!”*

I remained cowering on the floor. I saw fire in his eyes and his clenched jaw, as he told me again to get up. He towered over me and his size overwhelmed me. *If I get up, he’s going to hit me again.* I was both terrified and yet ashamed of myself for lying to him. I hoped he would forgive me.

Instead of getting up, I grabbed him around his legs holding onto them, begging his forgiveness.

“Jeff, I’m sorry. I am so sorry.” I just kept repeating it.

“Please forgive me.”

He began to walk away dragging me across the floor.

“I told you no more letters!”

Finally, he reached down and pulled me up within inches of his face, squeezing both my arms so hard I momentarily forgot about the pain in my cheek and eye. My body was limp like a Raggedy Ann doll. My feet barely touched the ground as he held me up by my arms.

“Don’t you *ever* lie to me again!”

He waited.

Still crying, but petrified he might hit me again, after a few moments, with my voice quivering, I said, “I won’t.”

“Don’t you know I know everything you do?”

He pushed me onto the bed and left. He left me alone sitting in the room, with my eye throbbing and my heart breaking.

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4 In the original work, *Let Me Prey Upon You*, emphasis was placed on certain words and phrases by using all capital letters. To meet stylistic guidelines for this publication, those words and phrases originally emphasized in all capital letters have been changed to italics.

It was a moment of complete and utter clarity. Any hope I ever had of getting away from him was lost. Any silly fantasy I had about my prince charming whisking me away was forever gone. There was no one to rescue me. No one to tell. No one to ever really love me. This was to be my life and I had to accept it. Defeated, from now on, I would do whatever he told me. There was no point in fighting back.

Around 11:00 that evening I left the hotel. I got off the elevator in the Pogue's parking garage. It was very dark with only three cars left on the upper level where I had parked my car. I was alone in the garage with only the sound of my footsteps and a few creaking pipes. Despondently, I shuffled to my car, recognizing the danger, but not afraid. I wished someone would attack me and kill me. After what I had done and who I had become, I deserved to be found dead lying on a cold, dirty garage floor. Then the pain of these last few years and losing Kent would be gone.

The next morning, I awoke, relieved to see my eye had only a slight cut above my upper lid. With a generous amount of make-up, the discoloration was covered well enough. Looking in the mirror as I got dressed, I kept second guessing myself.

*Why did I lie to him? Why did I think I could lie, and he wouldn't find out?*

*Why did I ever agree to go out with Kent? Why didn't I just do as he told me and not write Kent?*

If I had not lied, none of this would have happened and I wouldn't be staring at a person I hated in the mirror. It was my fault. I had disobeyed and then I needed to lie. From now on, I would do as he told me. The question of how long Jeff would make me suffer for my sin of lying loomed largest in my mind. After last night, anything was possible. I would never know what lies Jeff told Kent about why I stopped writing.

I finished dressing, got in my car, and drove to church. Putting on my choir robe, I took my seat in the choir next to Cindy. She noticed something was wrong. "Are you okay?" She asked.

Lowering my head and pulling my hair over my eye, I responded, "Yeah, I just don't feel well."

I looked over as Jeff took his seat just to the right of the choir, holding his Bible and notes. No expression. As the organ began to play, he looked over at me and smiled and nodded. He then stood up and with his hands on the podium, he simply said, "Welcome to our service this morning. We are glad you are here." I then stood with the choir as we sang, "Lead On O King Eternal."

Back to normal.

## 8 Who Said It Was Over?

The abuse continued for five years until his actions were discovered by two members of the church. Once the elders were informed my fate was determined. He was given the opportunity to beg forgiveness. I, however, was told to remain silent. I was told not to tell my parents. I was told by the elders to behave normally, all in their effort to protect Jeff Coulier and his family. He was given a going away party and moved to the next church. I was blamed.

I received a call from Milton Crane, the head of Walnut Branch elders.

“Sandy, Mr. Hahn and I would like to meet with you.”

“Okay.”

“We want you to meet us in the Fellowship Hall tonight at 7:00.”

“Okay, I will be there.”

He gave no indication as to why they wanted to meet me, or that I might want to bring my parents or someone with me. I trusted them, like I would any church official, so I didn't ask. Mr. Crane was an older gentleman, old enough to be my grandfather. He was very well respected, not only at Walnut Branch, but throughout the Christian community. He had served on the board at Cincinnati Christian University, had published many articles in various Christian publications, and was an ordained minister. His daughter was one of my Sunday School teachers.

Mr. Hahn was the father of one of my friends in the youth group. He was chairman of the elders and Mr. Crane was chairman of the board.

On the evening I was asked to meet at the church, I pulled into the church parking lot to find only their two cars. Usually the church was a hub of activity, yet this Tuesday evening it was strangely quiet and dark. Walking down the dimly lit hallway approaching the Fellowship Hall, I couldn't help but think of all the number of times I had been in that room over the years.

As I entered the room, both men were seated in two chairs with a third chair pulled over facing them, which obviously was meant for me. I remember Mr. Crane had his Bible in his lap. Mr. Hahn stood up and asked me to have a seat. It wasn't until that moment I felt nervous and a bit concerned I was in this room with these two men and wondered what they may want to discuss.

Nothing could have prepared me for the words I was about to hear. Without hesitation and with the voice of a scolding father, Mr. Hahn looked at me and said, “You are to leave this church.”

Stunned. I just sat there for a moment until the words sunk in.

*You are to leave this church.*

I put my hand over my mouth to stifle my crying.

*You are to leave this church. You are to leave this church. You are to leave this church.*

That's all I kept hearing over and over in my mind.

This church was not just any church, it was MY church and now I was being told I had to leave?

*You are to leave this church.*

Where would I go? What would I do?

*You are to leave this church.*

I loved this church. It was my whole life.

*You are to leave this church.*

It was the only church I knew and now I was being told to leave.

*You are to leave this church.*

I was sick to my stomach. I was scared.

They continued to talk but all I could hear were their words repeating over and over in my head.

*You are to leave this church.*

I sat there alone in this room with these two men who now decided I was no longer fit to worship in MY church. These were not just any men. They were the elders.

## 9 Preparation

It would be the drive to Queensgate, twenty-seven years after being told to leave the church, that would force me to face the truth about what was done to me in 1976. After much thought and discussion with close friends, I made the decision to confront him. In 2004, I hired a private investigator, Jim Simon, to locate my abuser. He was found, still ministering, in a church in Alabama. A meeting was then set for me to confront him.

The meeting was set. Now questions haunted me. What did I hope to accomplish? Will I walk into that room and be that sixteen-year-old girl again? How should I respond if he said he was sorry? Would I believe him? Should I?

From the recorded conversations with Jim Simon, I knew a little bit of how Jeff Coulier might react and respond. He had admitted he knew he hurt me,



but he thought I was happy. He wanted Jim Simon to convey to me how sorry he was. But I knew he had no idea *how* he hurt me. Words are easy, particularly for a narcissist like him. Still, I wanted him to know exactly what he had done. It wasn't enough for me to say to him, "You hurt me." And it certainly wasn't enough for him to say, "I am sorry."

If I wasn't vigilant about reminding myself why I was having this meeting, I could easily have found myself listening to the part of my brain from twenty-seven years ago. I was doubting my every move. And still fearful of him after all these years, his words, "Don't ever tell," never really left me.

I was not only confronting Jeff Coulier, but also the practice of the church to keep these matters secret. Just as my former church, Walnut Branch Church, kept Jeff's sexual misconduct hidden, his current boss, Sam Fitzgerald, was now doing the same thing. Neither his congregation nor his elders knew of his past. Jeff Coulier had a long history of misconduct championed by the devil. He had served in at least three churches and in all three at least one known act of sexual abuse occurred. Any teen or vulnerable woman in his current church might well be his next victim.

I planned to meet with Sam Fitzgerald, his boss, the following day after the meeting with Jeff Coulier and express my concerns about Jeff remaining in ministry. I would also inform his elders. I would draft a letter I intended to send after the meeting. Past experiences told me elders usually don't do the right things in these situations, and with Jeff Coulier's pattern of manipulation, the elders may well not take any action, let alone inform the congregation. With that in mind, I also intended to send a letter to the president of the denomination.

## 10 Confrontation

One confrontation was complete but there were more meetings I needed to find answers. My meeting with Sam Fitzgerald was held October 24, 2004.

As the meeting started, Sam Fitzgerald, Jeff's boss, started to speak, "Sandy let me just say I know how difficult this is and I want you to know that Jeff ..." *Oh no you don't. You are not going to take control of this meeting.* I cut him off.

"I appreciate that, but I will tell you what *I* expect to happen here today. First, I want you to know I did not come here out of revenge or spite. I am here because I need to heal and begin the process of healing from the pain

caused by Jeff Coulier; painful memories I have tried to suppress for twenty-seven years.”

Looking at Jeff, I leaned forward in my chair, with my hands clasped holding a handkerchief. Keeping his eyes fixed upon me, I said:

For the past seven months I have taken a very painful journey to get to where I am today. I could not have done it without the help of my friends and the support of my husband. In the end, after much soul searching and prayer, I knew the only way for me to resolve this was to face you and tell you what I should have said to you thirty-two years ago when you first kissed me.

Your behavior and what you did to me was unethical, immoral, and illegal and you had no right to do it.

I was sixteen years old. You were thirty, married with two children and the minister of my church. You took advantage of my youth and innocence and my complete trust in you as my minister.

At this point I showed him a picture of us taken together at a church retreat just before the abuse began. Without changing his expression, he quickly looked at the picture, turned it over, put it on the table and slid it back to me. I grabbed the picture, held it close to his face and demanded, “*look at this!*”

His expression did not change. I continued.

I was just a kid. Do you remember? You violated the most sacred of relationships; that of a minister and a member of his congregation. You used your position to sexually exploit me. You were supposed to be my moral guide, love me, care for me, and protect me. I was a child of God. Instead, you twisted it and made it all perverse. But even worse, your exploitation of me was deliberate and calculated.

*You knew exactly what you were doing!*

The church should have been a safe place for me and because of you, it was not. My mother had every right to expect that her daughter would be safe in her own home with the minister of the church. Even now, I am afraid to be left alone with a minister.

I leaned forward and pointed my finger at him, “*That’s what you did to me.*”

“While I have faith in God, I have no spiritual connection to the church. It is still unbelievable to me, even after the elders found out what you had done

there was still discussion about you remaining at Walnut Branch and *I was the one told to leave the church! And you stood by and let them!*"

At this point Jeff Coulier responded, "Everything she said is right on target. I probably should have been shot for what I did. I can only say I am sorry. I didn't know how to make it right. I've had a history of hurting the people I love. My behavior hurt the church. I know I don't deserve it, but for your sake, you need to forgive me." Pausing he said, "All I can say is I am sorry."

Everything he said was about him; he had an alcoholic father, he had hurt churches in his past, he had therapy, he was a sexual addict, he had taken boundary classes, he is faithful to his wife. Not once did he articulate or give any hint of understanding what he did to me. The only time I was mentioned in his response was his statement I needed to forgive him.

Then I said, again looking directly at him, "You can never give me back what you have taken from me, and there isn't enough anger in the world to make what you did to me right." I then had him read a list I had prepared describing what he had done and the effect it had upon my life. I needed him to articulate exactly how he hurt me.

Then Sam Fitzgerald spoke. "First, let me say I admire your courage, but you are describing a man I don't know. This is not the Jeff I know today."

"I don't want to discuss that. I came here to confront Jeff and I did that. I'm finished. I will meet with you tomorrow," I said with authority in my voice which even surprised me. With that we stood up and left the room.

## 11 Seeking Justice

I hoped my meeting with Sam Fitzgerald would bring understanding and acknowledgement of the lifelong effects of Jeff Coulier's abuse. I expected my concerns and his past pattern of multiple incidences of sexual misconduct might result in his removal, or at the very least, his congregation would be made aware of Coulier's long history of abuse.

Sam Fitzgerald began our meeting by thanking me for my discretion. Before I could say anything, he said, "I know and have seen firsthand the pain caused when a minister falls and steps out of his boundaries." I held my composure but felt fury inside.

"*Fall?! Steps out of his boundaries?!*" I was incredulous. He did not fall or step out of bounds. This is not a playground activity or a basketball game. He had

gravely sinned and exploited a minor, using God to do it. I let him continue. “Jeff knows he hurt you and he took away your teenage years, and he cannot give those back to you.”

After all I said in that meeting, Jeff Coulier’s view was that he *took away my teenage years*? He took away my spiritual life!

He continued to tell me how Jeff Coulier was no longer the same person and he was no longer a threat. He even said, “I can tell you this, I would leave my fourteen-year-old daughter alone with him.”

“Unfortunately, my mother felt the same,” I responded.

I then asked him, “How do you know he is changed? *You don’t know that.*” Sam Fitzgerald continued defending him, saying, “I have had the privilege of seeing him and knowing him. He is sincere.”

I interrupted him, “That’s exactly what he wants you to believe.”

“Sandy, he has done some wonderful things here. I do know he had intense therapy for his sexual addiction, and I do believe in the power of God to change people. I believe he has been transformed. He has self-imposed boundaries. He will not counsel one on one or meet at the church with anyone. He does not have a private office.”

“So why,” I asked, “were you not aware of the number of times he committed sexual misconduct during his ministry in the past? Why do you only have limited knowledge if you are in charge of him? How do you justify a man with such a history of sexual misconduct is permitted to have *self-imposed* boundaries?”

I continued,

If you don’t know his weaknesses and his background, and what he is capable of, how do you know he is no longer a threat or even if you have the proper safeguards in place? Are these the characteristics you want in our spiritual leaders; a man who must be watched for sexual misconduct, an admitted sexual addict, and all the while keeping this information from the congregation and putting them at risk?

With my voice rising just a bit I asked, “And don’t you think Mrs. Smith or Mrs. Jones sitting in your congregation should be the ones deciding for themselves if they feel safe with him? Not you. You have no right to keep his extensive background of sexual misconduct from the congregation.”

He responded, “I suppose we differ on that.”

Before the meeting ended, I informed him I was going to send a letter to the eleven elders informing them of Jeff Coulier’s past. Leaving the meeting I was convinced no action would be taken by Sam Fitzgerald. Three days later,

I received a letter from Sam Fitzgerald expressing concern and fear about sending the letter to the eleven elders at the church.<sup>5</sup>

## 12 Obstacles

The lack of church hierarchy allowed the perpetrator to remain hidden and made Sam Fitzgerald's response predictable. Blaming the victim and asking for silence is the norm.

In part, this was his message. The entirety of the letter can be found in the appendix of my book. Sam Fitzgerald's four-page response arrived less than a week after the meeting. He had not looked at the disciplinary file as promised. His words stung. He indicated he considered Jeff Coulier a low risk because he felt Jeff Coulier had changed dramatically. He called Jeff Coulier a father figure and asserted his life and words bear witness to the Gospel in the church where he has built the congregation to be "300 members with a beautiful new building." He feared people might leave the church if Jeff's sins were exposed.<sup>6</sup>

The letter ended with him asking me to not send a letter to the elders and the president of the denomination. He had the gall to write, "I would be afraid the damage done to a dynamic congregation, the damage to people's faith, the damage to their sense of security in relationship, the damage to their ability to trust, and the collapse of their spiritual dreams *would weigh upon your spirit.*"<sup>7</sup>

In Sam Fitzgerald's exact words, "If you were to send such a letter, you would know in your heart you may single-handedly veto the experience of God's grace for many, many people. That, to me, would be quite a load to carry. I believe it would create new wounds for you." He continued, "Sandy, I have doubts sending a letter like the one you drafted will bring healing." The message once again: I would be to blame.<sup>8</sup>

He then reminded me again, I had a limited view of who Jeff Coulier was. I should accept the wisdom of those who are able to see more than I am able to see. He ended the letter by once again expressing concern for Jeff Coulier's past being exposed, "*My concern relates to how much information gets to whom*

5 Sam Fitzgerald, letter to Sandy Phillips Kirkham, October 28, 2004.

6 Ibid., 3.

7 Ibid., 4.

8 Ibid., 4.

*and whether those who receive the information benefit from it. I will keep you informed.*"<sup>9</sup>

He never kept us informed. I sent the letter to the eleven elders of his church. No one responded. Not one.

I was relatively new at telling people about abuse, yet I could see in his words, in the implied threat of shame, he was employing a tool used by predators on many victims. The message is to stay quiet, sharing truth will hurt institutions and people, and it is better to hide the truth. It was classic church-response rhetoric.

### 13      The Elders

It was not only the sexual abuse which affected my life but the response of the two elders who told me to leave the church. I confronted them, looking for an acknowledgement that what they did to me was wrong. Again, I would be disappointed in their responses. Of the two elders, Milton Crane agreed to meet me, the other refused. Both denied ever telling me to leave the church, despite a letter I had saved with their signatures at the bottom as the elders inviting the members to Jeff Coulier's going away party.

Four days after sending the letter requesting to meet, Milton Crane called me. "Dear, I was so glad to get your letter."<sup>10</sup> I have thought of you many times over the years. I have prayed for you."

We agreed to meet but the friendliness of his tone told me he did not understand the purpose of my request. Could it be he thought I was coming to him to finally confess my sins and ask for forgiveness? Should I tell him why I wanted to meet with him? The irony did not escape me. Thirty years later I was requesting *him* to meet me and he did not seem to know what the meeting was about or consider he may want to have someone in attendance with him. Our roles were now reversed.

The meeting started with introductions and his first comment to me was, "You're just as pretty as I remember you."

After reading to him the facts of what actually took place at Walnut Branch, Jeff Coulier's grooming, manipulation, and control of me, his violent behavior

9      Sandy Phillips Kirkham, *Let Me Prey Upon You* (Cincinnati, OH: Absam, LLC, 2019), 174.

10     Milton Crane and Ed Hahn, letter to the congregation, 1976.

and sexual abuse, I told him of my confrontation with Jeff Coulier. He seemed surprised and said, "Good for you."

I continued by saying, "It was wrong of Jeff Coulier to take away my innocence and my virginity, but the response of Walnut Branch Christian Church was also wrong. At the time, you were chairman of the board and Ed Hahn was chairman of the elders. That's why I am here."

"As a teenager, you'll remember, I was very active at Walnut Branch. I sang in the choir. I taught Sunday School. I led youth retreats. If Walnut Branch's doors were open, I was there spending time and energy on something I loved so much and growing in my faith and my relationship to God."

"When Jeff Coulier violated me all that changed. The church became contaminated for me because of what he did to me. A place where I once found joy and peace, now brings me only conflict and pain. Walnut Branch's response to the situation contributed significantly to those feelings."

"Walnut Branch never held Jeff Coulier accountable or disciplined him for what he did to me, what he did to his wife, what he did to his children, or what he did to the members of Walnut Branch. To the contrary, he was sent off with a celebration including gifts and a letter signed by you and Ed saying, "How grateful many parents will be for the influence Jeff Coulier had on their young people.""

I continued with the facts about the night he and Ed asked me to leave the church. He sat straight up and looked at me and said, "Honey, I don't remember any meeting with you, and I would *never* tell anyone to leave the church."

"Well, whether you remember or not, it is *exactly* what happened. Milton, you did not take my innocence or my virginity, Jeff Coulier did that, but what you and Ed took from me in the meeting on that night in 1976 was a lifetime of love and trust of the church."

When I finished, he then went on to disparage Jeff Coulier, and how bad he was. Again, he repeated he never liked or trusted him.

"I blame him totally."

"Milton, it wasn't just Jeff Coulier to blame. Walnut Branch was wrong as well." Sitting there looking a bit stunned, he now seemed to understand the purpose of the meeting. I continued, "Even after knowing what Jeff Coulier had done, there was a vote among the elders and you as chairman, to try and keep him on staff and keep his actions hidden from the congregation!"

"Not only was Jeff Coulier not disciplined, he was given a going-away party by the congregation and invitation came to me and my mother, from you and Ed!"

He interrupted me, "Oh no! I wasn't even on the board then."

So, both Ed and Milton used the same defense. “Couldn’t have been me, I wasn’t on the board.”

He then began to tell me how wonderful I was, what a fine young person he remembered me to be. “You were a beautiful girl and smart too. I’m trying to remember the last time I saw you.”

“It was in 1976 when you told me to leave the church,” I said and looked directly at him, amazed about his denial.

Again, he repeated, “Now honey, I was not a part of that. I wasn’t on the board then.”

Looking at him squarely in the eye, while holding the letter from 1976 inviting the congregation to Jeff Coulier’s going away party, with his name at the bottom I said, “You weren’t on the board at the time?”

“No, I was not.”

I then handed the letter signed by him and Ed Hahn to him.<sup>11</sup>

“I am flabbergasted. I have never seen this letter. I did not write this letter. I did not authorize this letter.”<sup>12</sup>

“It clearly shows you were not only on the board; you were the chairman.”

“I did not authorize this letter. I have never seen I it,” he said, defiantly.<sup>13</sup>

## 14 Epilogue

In 2018, we were at a friends’ house sitting in her screened-in porch celebrating another friend’s birthday. It was a steamy July day, and the backyard pool looked inviting. As my friends went inside to load their plates with salads and desserts, I lingered for a moment on the same porch where I told my story for the first time fourteen years ago. How grateful I felt for their love and support. It was this very spot where I started to deal with the most painful chapter in my life. It was here where I first stuttered those words, “I was sexually abused by my youth minister.” It was then when and where my healing began.

With the healing came my need and passion to speak out about clergy abuse. Through the years, I’ve continued to work with The Hope of Survivors ministry. I now serve on the board of the Council on Child Abuse (COCA). I’ve spoken to many groups and churches on the topic of prevention and I have met courageous survivors. After one such presentation, several of the attendees remarked, “You should write a book.”

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



I began to understand my story could have an impact. Over the years the same suggestion came from many of my friends. It took thirteen years before I felt strong enough to consider allowing a much larger audience see my pain and struggles. When I spoke to groups, I could see their faces. I was comfortable in front of a crowd. Writing a book seemed scarier. Eventually, I realized the wound I once protected was now but a fading scar. Perhaps I could share my story in a book.

Now stronger, and with a clearer understanding of clergy abuse, I realize there are things I would have done differently if I were to again begin this journey I started in 2004. But looking back, in the midst of my pain and healing, I did the best I could. At age seventy-seven, Jeff Coulier is semi-retired and remains in good standing with the Disciples of Christ denomination.

One of the most agonizing decisions in writing this book was whether to name the pastor who abused me. For years I lived with the shame caused by this man; didn't he deserve to be shamed? In keeping his identity a secret, was I complicit in keeping his actions a secret? Over the years, I never revealed his identity when lecturing, speaking with victims, or in my work with survivor networks. My goal was always to expose the horrors of clergy abuse, not to make it a personal vendetta.

Writing allowed me to tell my story. My story is backed up by hundreds of pages of materials verifying what took place: his signed confession, written correspondence with his ministry officials, letters, and taped recordings of everything from conversations, his sermons, and meetings. I am a packrat. For years, boxes of memories from church sat unopened in my basement. Once I began to search for explanations, I had the courage to look through the boxes. In this book, I have changed the names of the pastor, the church leaders, including those who allowed the abuser to continue in the ministry (and to continue to sexually abuse women) and the name of the church where the abuse occurred. I have chosen to use real names of those who were supportive and kind to me through this process.

My story is told not as much about shaming my abuser publicly, but to explain how clergy abuse happens. My story shows how a charismatic leader (and a church full of such people) can thwart the word of God and create massive harm. The church elders who hid his actions to save his reputation, while removing me from the church, deserved to be "outed." However, they are no longer living and I saw no benefit to visit the sins of the fathers on their children.

While I was writing this book, the #MeToo movement, and the lesser known, but growing, #MeTooChurch movement were born. These groups provide so many victims a voice. My hope is those who have been abused are now heard

and believed, and perhaps books such as mine and organizations such as The Hope of Survivors and Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), will bring light and better understanding to the topic of clergy abuse. Our goal is to provide hope and healing to victims.

To my fellow survivors, you are not alone.