**enditnow**® Emphasis Day

Resource Packet

August 26, 2023

Sermon

Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing

When those who claim to be followers of Jesus harm others

Written by Ann Hamel and Cheri Corder

Workshop

Sarah’s Diary

Written by Ann Hamel and Cheri Corder

**enditnow**®

Adventists Say No to Violence

Prepared by Department of Women’s Ministries

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

On behalf of the enditnow® team of General Conference departments

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Children’s Ministries, Education, Family Ministries, Health Ministries,

Ministerial Association, Women’s Ministries, Youth Ministries

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GENERAL CONFERENCE

WORLD HEADQUARTERS



WOMEN’S MINISTRIES

April 12, 2023

Dear Church Leaders:

Joyful greetings. This year we send you an **enditnow**® packet that is once again very important and very sensitive. The title is “Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing.” Have you ever heard the analogy that compares the church to a flock of sheep? Both the Old and the New Testaments refer to God’s people as sheep, to the body of believers as a flock, and to our Lord as the Shepherd.

Our churches are filled with imperfect and broken people. We may encounter a wolf disguised in sheep’s clothing, or a wolf disguised in shepherd’s clothing. Some shepherds, declares Jeremiah, “have lost their senses. They no longer seek wisdom from the Lord” (Jeremiah 10:21, NLT).

Last year we focused enditnow day on abuse of power by someone in leadership in the church, such as a Pathfinder leader, a deacon, or even the pastor. Today we are addressing another difficult topic of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, among those who profess to be followers of Jesus. Unfortunately, abuse occurs in churches and communities of all faiths. The impact of abuse is always serious, but the impact is multiplied when perpetrated by one of the sheep—that is, by a person claiming to be a follower of Jesus.

Often, we think that abuse involves violence, but none of these cases we share include violence. None of them indicate that the “victim” resisted the abuse or reached out for help. At the time it was happening, none of them even recognized it as abuse. Yet because of the power differential that existed in each case, and the inability to give meaningful consent, each one was violated.

With love and joy,

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Heather-Dawn Small

Women’s Ministries Director

“I thank my God every time I remember you…with joy.” Philippians 1:3-6

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Table of Contents

[Program Notes 3](#_Toc132276261)

[Scripture References 3](#_Toc132276262)

[About the Authors 4](#_Toc132276263)

[Sample Bulletin Announcement 5](#_Toc132276264)

[Outline of Divine Service 6](#_Toc132276265)

[Children’s Story 7](#_Toc132276266)

[Sermon 8](#_Toc132276267)

[Workshop 20](#_Toc132276268)

# Program Notes

Please feel free to translate, adjust, and edit the resource packet according to your division’s needs, including the best Bible version for your use. Also, you are free to adapt the packet according to your cultural audience. When your division has translated the assigned packet for French, Portuguese, and Spanish, please send us a digital file to share with our sisters who need it. Check our website for additional translated packets that you may be able to use.

# Scripture References

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# About the Authors

**Dr. Ann Hamel** is a psychologist with the International Service Employee Support Team of the General Conference. She is involved both in preparing missionaries for mission service as well as supporting them if and when they face challenges, hardships, or tragedy as they serve. Dr. Hamel specializes in traumatology and is a Board-Certified Expert in Traumatic Stress. She has a PhD in Psychology from Andrews University and a Doctor of Ministry in Formational Counseling from Ashland Theological Seminary. She also has a certificate in Global Mental Health: Trauma and Recovery from Harvard University. She and her husband, Loren, live in Berrien Springs. Together they have seven children and nine grandchildren.

**Cheri Corder** has been involved in Women’s Ministries for over 35 years, including 8 years as Director of Women’s Ministries for the Oregon Conference. She has also served as a conference director for Family Ministries, Health Ministries, Children’s Ministries, and Adventist Community Services. Her speaking opportunities have included numerous women’s retreats, camp meeting seminars, two conferences on abuse, and an evangelistic series in a little church in Costa Rica. Her final ministry role before retiring was that of Missionary Care Coordinator for Adventist Frontier Missions. In these leadership roles, she has attended multiple training sessions regarding abuse and has had the privilege of hearing the painful journeys of countless men and women. She and her husband live in Berrien Springs, Michigan. They have two grown children and two precious little grandsons.

**Tanya Muganda** was born in Michigan, USA, but lived in Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Kenya before relocating to Maryland, USA, where she currently resides. Tanya serves as the Administrative Assistant at the General Conference Children’s Ministries Department. Tanya obtained her Master’s in Children and Family Ministry. She wants to use her gifts and training to serve the children in our global church.

# Sample Bulletin Announcement

**Coming Sabbath, August 26, at 11:00 am and at 1:30 pm**

**“Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing”** is a candid look at abuse by anyone in a position of spiritual authority or influence. While abuse is always destructive, the damage and fallout are magnified when it is perpetrated by someone who claims to be a Christian and is either a member or a leader within the church. The morning session will give an overview of what constitutes abuse along withthe unique impact of abuse when it is perpetrated by someone who claims to follow and represent Jesus. It will also examine the responsibility of the community of faith to the victim as well as to the abuser when abuse does occur. The afternoon session will start with a short film entitled “Sarah’s Diary” which features a true story illustrating *how one in a position of spiritual authority and influence can become “a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”* This will be followed by an open dialogue about how the body of Christ should protect “members of the flock, particularly the lambs in our midst” as well as how to respond when it does happen.

*Please note: Although the morning session’s terminology is softened to accommodate a general audience, a separate service for children may be advisable. The afternoon session is for adults.*

# Outline of Divine Service

A *Suggested* Order of Service

A Call to Worship

Opening Prayer

Scripture Reading Matthew 7:15, NASB

“Beware of false prophets,

who come to you in sheep’s clothing,

but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

Hymn of Praise: #187 *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*

“Jesus What a Friend of Sinners”

Pastoral Prayer

Children’s Offering and Story

“Title”

Call for the Offering

Special Music or Hymn

Sermon

“Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing”

Hymn of Response: #75 *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*

“The Wonder of It All”

Closing Prayer

# Children’s Story

Dinah’s Story

Written by Tanya Muganda, General Conference Children’s Ministries

Did you know that Joseph had a sister? Dinah was one of the youngest children of Jacob and Leah and their only daughter. Dinah came from a large family of twelve brothers.

In Genesis 34, we meet Dinah, a young lady who had always started her day meeting the other women of the land and taking care of errands. She felt safe and never worried that she could be in danger. But one day, Dinah had gone out as usual and Shechem, who was the son of Hamor, saw Dinah. He followed her and without her permission took advantage of Dinah doing something very bad to her. Shechem had touched Dinah inappropriately. Even after that sad situation Shechem fell in love with Dinah and wanted to marry her.

Shechem was determined to get permission from Dinah’s father Jacob by offering money for marriage. Jacob found out about what had happened to Dinah, and he was heartbroken. He was also furious, but he waited for his sons to come home to decide what to do. When all Dinah’s brothers found out what Shechem did to Dinah, they were also very angry.

But Dinah’s brothers Levi and Simeon made their own plans. They thought, “We will get revenge for our sister and trick Shechem along with his men before accepting his proposal.” Simeon and Levi did a violent act to Shechem, and he was harmed and died along with his men.

Because of their anger the brothers wanted revenge. They wanted to protect their only sister, which was the right thing to do, but what they did was the wrong response.

Although Jacob was angry at what had happened to Dinah, he was greatly disappointed at his sons’ violent actions against Shechem. Jacob told his sons, “God will avenge in His own way and restore.” But the warning came too late. Now everyone had been affected negatively with consequences they could never take back. Their sinful acts had already been done and nothing could change the results.

If someone makes you feel uncomfortable let your parents know right away. If someone talks to you or touches you without your permission, you have the right to say no and to report what happened to someone you trust.

God does not like to see His children being mistreated. Let us remember to treat one another with kindness and to think before we act, because bad actions can cause life-changing consequences. Let us pray for the protection and safety of all children.

# Sermon

Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing

When those who claim to be followers of Jesus harm others

*When sexual abuse is perpetrated by Christians/Christian leaders*

Written by Ann Hamel and Cheri Corder

Scripture reading Matthew 7:15, NASB

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing,

but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

**Introduction**

Have you ever heard the analogy that compares the church to a flock of sheep? I am quite sure you have. Both the Old and the New Testaments refer to God’s people as sheep, to the body of believers as a flock, and to our Lord as the Shepherd. One of the most beloved chapters in the Bible is Psalm 23. The Lord calls Himself our “good shepherd” (John 10:11, NASB), and we are “the sheep of His pasture” (Psalm 100:3, NASB), but our leaders are also compared to shepherds. In addressing pastors and elders who are tending the flock, Paul says, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock… to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:28, NASB).

We all want to believe that our churches are safe places, where the shepherds and the sheep all live according to God’s standards. Unfortunately, we all know from experience that this is not the case. Our churches are filled with imperfect and broken people. In fact, occasionally we encounter a wolf disguised in sheep’s clothing. Furthermore, sometimes we encounter a wolf disguised in shepherd’s clothing. Some shepherds, declares Jeremiah, “have lost their senses. They no longer seek wisdom from the Lord” (Jeremiah 10:21, NLT).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Today we are addressing the difficult topic of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, among those who profess to be followers of Jesus. Unfortunately, abuse occurs in churches and communities of all faiths. The impact of abuse is always serious, but the impact is multiplied when perpetrated by one of the sheep—that is, by a person claiming to be a follower of Jesus. It is even more damaging when it is done by a shepherd of the flock—a Pathfinder leader, a teacher, or a pastor.

“How can something as hideous as abuse happen in the church?” you might ask. If you look around a typical congregation, everyone seems nice; most everyone has been baptized; we’re preaching the three angels’ messages around the world; the Lord’s people are the “apple of His eye” (Zechariah 2:8, NASB). How can the problems and pain of abuse exist in our church?

We’d like to submit two reasons:

(1) Wherever fallen humanity is gathered, you have the problems of fallen humanity.

(2) The church is the devil’s FAVORITE place to work!

The devil loves to work in governments, and organizations, and entertainment, certainly…but do not doubt this: he puts his BEST, most intense efforts into stirring up trouble in the Church, with both its members and its leaders.

Fortunately, our Seventh-day Adventist Church has taken decisive steps—particularly in the last couple of decades—not simply to talk about these issues but also to help ensure the safety of our children and members on a global level. Abuse Prevention Emphasis Day was added to the church’s worldwide calendar in 2001. In 2009, the initiative was expanded under the name **enditnow**®. Resource material focused on an aspect of abuse is provided to our churches around the world for our annual **enditnow** Emphasis Day, the fourth Sabbath of August.

Aren’t you glad we have leaders who are paying attention to these kinds of issues? So today, as part of the **enditnow** initiative, we’ll talk about it, with the following goals in mind:

* Acknowledge that it exists,
* Understand it better, and
* Respond more effectively.

Coming to terms with the reality that this DOES HAPPEN is the first step in enabling us to make our communities of faith even safer.

**Let’s pray as we begin**

Dear Father in Heaven, thank you for our worldwide family of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Thank you for the courageous, insightful leaders who have developed initiatives to address difficult church family issues such as this one. Lord, please be here with us today in a special way. If there are any for whom this topic will be particularly difficult, be especially close to them as we go through the material. Open our hearts and our minds to what will bring healing to those already hurting over these issues, and to use this time together to help us avoid future pain. We ask this in the name of Jesus, Amen.

**Let’s start by defining abuse**

Sometimes we think of an abuser as a stranger who climbs through a window, or who approaches a person in a dark alley. Most child abuse is, however, perpetrated by someone the child knows and loves, usually someone that they trust and depend on. It’s often a family member. It may also be a close family friend or a neighbor because 91% of childhood sexual abuse is committed by someone whom the child and the family knows and trusts.

The church is known as the body of Christ and the family of God. Just as sexual abuse occurs within families, it also occurs in communities of faith. Where are we going to find people whom we know and trust? Where are we going to find a place to let down our safeguards? In our families…and at church.

Sexual abuse is underreported, and definitions of abuse vary from state to state and country to country, so we don’t have precise numbers on the rates of abuse, but estimates are that about 1 in 10 boys and 1 in 5 girls will experience sexual abuse in childhood. As much as we might not like to acknowledge it, studies done within our church show similar statistics.[[2]](#footnote-2)

To help us look at this issue, here are seven true examples of abuse within our community of faith, the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We will comment on each example again as we go along.

**Case examples**

**Sarah** was seduced by her church school principal. Arranging for her to be his “secretary” enabled him to be alone in the building with her after school, and to call her out of class from time to time so she could “help him” in another part of the building. She thought it was love, but it was abuse.

**Danielle** had a crush on her junior academy music teacher and began flirting with him. He was delighted to take her up on what she was offering. She, too, thought it was love, but—even though she initiated it—this, too, was abuse.

**Matt** was struggling with seventh-grade math. His teacher invited him to stay after school so she could tutor him—and in the process, taught him some exciting new ways to have fun. He got a kick out of it initially, but it was abuse.

**David** was thrilled to be away from home and in the dorm for the first time, but balancing the academics with all his new social freedoms wasn’t coming easily. His advisor offered to take him to the local gym, just the two of them, so David could get a good workout, and they could talk. David felt strange when the adviser joined him in the shower and later realized that it was voyeurism. It wasn’t ministry, and even though he didn’t lay a hand on David, it was abuse.

**Amanda** was out of high school and had dedicated her life fully to the Lord. She longed to make a difference in the world, and to have a healthier family than she had grown up with. Her pastor claimed a fatherly role in her life and seeing her potential, mentored her in several areas of effective ministry. Ultimately, he mentored her in how to be a good wife. Initially she thought that was helpful, but it was abuse.

These are hard stories to hear, aren’t they? We have just two more.

**Brenda** was miserable in her marriage. Her husband was dismissive of her and in a multitude of ways made her feel inadequate and useless, even invisible. When he divorced her, she went to her pastor for help. He made her feel valued, beautiful, and alive. At the end of each counseling session, he would take her hands in his to pray—and then one day, he took more. She thought it was love. It was abuse.

**Susan** was a recently divorced single mother who moved to an Adventist community to find the support that was not available to her from her own non-Christian family. At church she met a spiritually committed Seventh-day Adventist Christian man whom she respected. Soon they were dating, and she believed God had brought him into her life. She trusted what she thought was his superior religious experience, so Susan believed the physical aspect of their relationship reflected his commitment to her and their future together. She felt betrayed both by him and by God when he decided that the relationship was not working for him. In taking advantage of her as he did, he had abused her.

We will comment again on each of these stories as we go along.

Often, we think that abuse involves violence, but none of these cases include violence. None of them indicate that the “victim” resisted the abuse or reached out for help. At the time it was happening, none of them even recognized it as abuse. Yet because of the power differential that existed in each case, and the inability to give meaningful consent, each one was violated.

Abuse is when an individual uses power or influence to take advantage of a vulnerable individual. The power and influence could have been used to bless the other person, but it was abused for selfish pleasure. Some shepherds of the Lord’s flock are like hungry wolves, and “like greedy dogs they are never satisfied. They are ignorant shepherds all following their own path and intent on personal gain (Isaiah 56:11, NLT). God rebukes them also. “Woe to you shepherds…who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?” (Ezekiel 34:2, NIV). This abuse of power and influence is the common factor in all the stories we just heard.

Most countries around the world define sexual abuse of a *child* as a crime. While it is common to have legal definitions that define this and make it mandatory to report, abuse can also occur between two adults if one person takes advantage of the vulnerability of another. This may be a new thought to us, but as Christians, the bar we set in defining abuse should be higher than the bar set by the world, just as Jesus raised the bar for adultery and divorce in Jewish practices of His time (Matthew 19:8-9).

**What is the impact of abuse?**

Victims of sexual abuse are sometimes told, “Oh, it’s not like he hurt you. You’re not black and blue or anything. In fact, you enjoyed it! So what are you complaining about? You’re fine! Get over it!”

But victims do receive black and blue marks—on the soul—and, it turns out, on nearly every aspect of the person’s future, including their future health.

Research shows that all types of childhood abuse have the potential to damage the developing brain of a child, predisposing them to life-long mental and physical health concerns, and increasing the risks for all kinds of problems—social, emotional, behavioral, and academic. It increases the likelihood of addictive behaviors in adolescents, as well as high risk behaviors, such as promiscuity. It also increases the risks of a wide variety of occupational, legal, financial, and social problems, and even the development of chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes.

The secrecy of the abuse creates a sense of isolation and disconnection from others that interferes with normal social and emotional development. Sexual abuse is particularly damaging to the very core of who a person is. When experienced as a child, it increases the risks for depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems in adults. When a child or an adult experiences sexual abuse, it produces a level of shame and guilt and an accompanying sense of worthlessness that some—who don’t receive help—are never able to escape.

When abuse is perpetrated by a Christian, the damage is all the greater because of the inherent layer of spiritual abuse that accompanies it. Trauma and abuse always cause one to question one’s faith or spiritual belief system, but sexual abuse perpetrated by one in a position of spiritual authority can demolish one’s faith. Paul writes, “But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you” (2 Timothy 3:14, NLT). But what does it do to your faith when it turns out you couldn’t trust the one who taught you?

**Two factors determining how a victim will be impacted**

1. The impact of abuse on someone is determined to a large degree by the level of emotional and social stability in the life of the victim prior to the abuse.

Unfortunately, it is often those who are vulnerable and who lack emotional and social stability in their lives who are targeted for abuse in the first place. For example, we know that disabled or handicapped children are abused at higher rates than other children. Vulnerable individuals are, by definition, more needy, less likely to tell, and less likely To be believed if they do tell.

One of the most important things that churches can do to safeguard against abuse is to support and strengthen families. Single parent families are particularly vulnerable. **Matt,** for example, was vulnerable to his seventh-grade teacher because of the circumstances of his parents’ divorce. His mother suspected something was not right between Matt and his teacher, but as a single mom in a new town, she feared she would jeopardize her employment with the church and cause her children even more trauma should she try to call out this teacher. Matt stayed quiet and tried to behave as if everything was okay. He wanted the help and attention that his teacher was giving him, and he also recognized that speaking up could destabilize his family situation even further. His mother was even more intimidated about calling out the teacher when the teacher was given the teacher of the year award.

Matt’s situation is not uncommon. It is very hard, if not impossible, for one parent to meet all the emotional and social needs of their children, making these children vulnerable to the attention offered to them by others. Many parents are grateful to have people, particularly within the church, who are willing to help provide care and support for their children. When a family system is fragile, parents tend to overlook signs indicating that something might be amiss.

1. The impact of abuse is also determined by the response of adults or those in positions of authority or influence when the abuse is reported.

It is often very difficult for a victim to tell anyone due to the feelings of guilt and shame. Many do not feel like victims but feel that they are responsible for what happened, and worry they are telling on themselves if they speak up. This is particularly true if the perpetrator made the experience pleasurable or exciting.

If a victim is not believed or the details of the story are challenged or questioned, the impact of the abuse is intensified. Not only does a victim already feel violated but now they feel unsafe and unprotected. Victims are sometimes blamed for what happened. Even young children (particularly those who are emotionally needy) are at times accused of being seductive. Unfortunately, this happens far more often than we would ever imagine, especially when the perpetrator is in a position of power and influence in the community.

People find it hard to believe negative reports about someone that they respect and look up to. The cognitive dissonance that it creates makes it easier to believe that the story is made up or at the very least exaggerated. This is one reason many victims never tell. In addition to their shame, they have the fear that they will not be believed.

**Responding to revelations of abuse**

**Sarah** experienced two very different responses. When she finally did go forward about the principal who had abused her, conference leaders did nothing about it. “He’s admitting it, he’s being honest,” they said, “which we find refreshing. And it was so long ago … Just what is it you want us to do?”

Well, Sarah didn’t know what should be done, but their decision to keep him on as a principal was a dark cloud over her. For them to ignore the abuse that she had endured over a period of years; to ignore the impact that it had had on her life, then to say that it was refreshing that he admitted his sin and was honest about it, was an offense not only to Sarah but to our Lord who said that it would be better for a millstone to be hung around someone’s neck than for that person to lead a child astray (see Matthew 18:6).

A few years later, the principal moved to a different conference, one where church leaders had a growing understanding of abusers and the continuing risk they pose to others. Providentially, they heard about Sarah’s experience before he began his responsibilities. They contacted her to confirm the rumor. The principal was “unhired” and appropriate boundaries were put in place to limit his leadership capacity in his local church.

This was *amazing* to Sarah, but there was more. The conference president called her to thank her for her help in dealing with this abuser. She was stunned. Not only that, on behalf of the church, he *apologized* for what a church employee had done to her and for what the church had not done when she first exposed him. That apology, and the justice of the boundaries placed on her abuser, brought some beautiful healing to Sarah.

Sometimes, especially when the victim is relatively unknown to us, it is easy to blame the victim. Perhaps it was how she dressed, or how she acted. People say, “She must have done something to bring that ‘good man’ down.”

Sometimes, the victim has indeed acted seductively. Take **Danielle,** for example, who had a crush on her music teacher and went after him. When their relationship was discovered, Danielle was sent away to a boarding academy to save the teacher’s marriage and career (which ended a couple of years later anyway). Danielle felt both guilt and bitterness for years until she finally learned that it was the ADULT who had been responsible for the relationship, not her. When Danielle flirted with him, it was his responsibility to distance himself from her, to make sure they were never alone, to teach her about appropriate relationships, to work with her parents and help get her into counseling. SHE had not broken up his marriage and ruined his career; HE had. He had abused his authority and influence in her life for selfish purposes. He had abused her.

Victims are also sometimes blamed for how they came forward. Most often, the complaint is that they didn’t follow the discipline guidelines of Matthew 18:15-20. Friends, please take another look at Matthew 18. It refers to resolving conflicts between equals. Victims and abusers are not equals! Using Matthew 18 when a victim is dealing with an abuser will likely not only be ineffective, but it can also be dangerous.

For example, when **Brenda** attempted to meet one-on-one with the pastor to confront him about his behavior, he violated her again, blaming her for his “weakness,” promising to commit suicide if she told on him, and even outlining exactly how he would do it. When she did gather the courage to expose him anyway, he denied everything, denied he even knew her, and complained that her claims could not be taken seriously because she had not followed Matthew 18. It was discovered that this pastor had abused multiple women, each one thinking—as Brenda did—that she was the love of his life. Fortunately, despite vehement objections from many in the congregation, the conference did remove him from ministry and his ordination was revoked.

**Action Plan**

Have safety and action plans in place for whenever an accusation arises against any church member. It protects everyone involved, including the offender.[[3]](#footnote-3)

If I told you the average number of victims an abuser has before they are held accountable, you wouldn’t even believe me. It is sobering. This is possible because often in an endeavor to extend grace or to assume innocence until proven guilty, especially if we know and love the accused but don’t really know the accuser, we often err on the side of giving offenders the benefit of our doubt. Unfortunately, when given a second or third chance, they often harm additional individuals.

This was true in David’s experience. **David** felt strange about his advisor coming into the shower with him at the gym and soon learned that it was known by students and faculty alike that this man had a problem with voyeurism.

In fact, the administration had on multiple occasions told this man to stop taking students to the gym and had even put it in writing, yet the behavior was allowed to continue.

David, along with a couple of support people, met with the advisor and then made a formal complaint. The advisor was released from his job, but had he been released sooner, David would have been spared an experience that made him feel both manipulated and humiliated. His experience at that school went downhill as a result, and he ended up leaving school, a decision which had far-reaching consequences in his life.

**Pay attention**

Pay attention to what happens in our congregations and schools. If we’re concerned about something, we must be willing to do what might be uncomfortable for everyone—and look into it.

Consider this from Judith Herman, a psychiatrist who specializes in sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress: “It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering.”

If you ever can support a victim, please do.

If you ever can hold an offender accountable, please do.

**good news**

Neuroscientists tell us that, as we’ve said, abuse has the potential to damage the brain, particularly the developing brain of a child. Although abuse does increase the risks of developing life-long mental and physical health challenges, we have good news: those challenges are not inevitable!

Just as God created our bodies to heal from injury and disease, He also created the brain and mind to heal. In fact, traumatologists tell us that the long-term impact of abuse depends less on the type and severity of the abuse than it does on the level of support that one receives in the aftermath of the abuse.

As the body of Christ and the followship of believers, this is good news! It’s important for us to know that how we respond to both the abused and the abuser will make a huge difference on the level of healing that each one experiences. Our response matters!

The most important thing that we can do when a person has been abused is to listen carefully to their story. Listen to the emotions and feelings they are conveying along with the details and facts of the story. Vulnerability is not something that most people can rationally articulate. Listen carefully and non-judgmentally. Listen with your heart.

**What about forgiving an abuser?**

As we all know, forgiving someone can be very difficult. One reason is that we often don’t know what it means. Does forgiving someone mean:

* That what they did is okay?
* That what I experienced doesn’t matter?
* That I’m going to move forward in my relationship with them as if nothing happened?
* That I am left with all this pain and suffering but they don’t have to face any consequences?
* How am I supposed to forgive someone who doesn’t give me a meaningful apology? Who doesn’t admit they did anything wrong? Or who doesn’t even admit they did anything at all?

The dictionary has more than one definition for the word “forgive.” When we use the word “forgive” here, we simply mean to give up bitterness. Therefore, the answer is NO to each of the questions above. Forgiving someone does NOT mean that what they did was okay or that it doesn’t matter, or that I have to go on in my relationship with them as if nothing happened, or that they don’t have to face any consequences.

Forgiveness names evil as evil. Forgiveness is NOT ignoring the evil which sends the message that the abuse was okay or that it didn’t matter. Forgiveness lets go of the debilitating emotions, not allowing the perpetrator to continue the power over you. It is being in control of your heart and mind and moving on.

As Christians, we want everyone to love each other and to get along. We want people to reconcile. We want everything to go back to how it was. However, reconciliation with the abuser, even with forgiveness, is not always possible, and not always recommended.

For example, once **Amanda** was married, the pastor who had mentored her in how to be a good wife in how to be a good wife wanted Amanda and her husband to forgive him… and continue to be friends with him and his family. He told them that resuming their friendship is what the Lord desires, because it demonstrates the power of God’s grace in their lives. Vulnerable to his suggestions, Amanda and her husband tried it for a while, but the pastor did not behave appropriately toward them, and they finally had to cut all ties with him and his family, which they should have done in the first place.

**examples of abuse in the Bible**

An example of abuse in Scripture is King David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11 and 12). The power differential between David and Bathsheba, as well as between David and Uriah her husband, played a significant role in the story. When the KING sent the message for Bathsheba to come to him, she obeyed. David ABUSED his legitimate and God-given power and authority for his own personal benefit, then he used that same power and authority to try to cover up what had occurred. God had something to say to David about what he had done. Although David repented and was forgiven, he paid a high price for it for the rest of his life.

Another biblical story of abuse (by a spiritual leader) is of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50), whom many believe had violated Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus*.* Ellen White says Jesus “desired [Simon] to see how great his guilt really was. He would show him that his sin was greater than hers.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Another reference to abuse (by a spiritual leader) is of Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who as priests were taking advantage of “young women assisting at the entrance of the Tabernacle” (1 Samuel 2:22, NLT). What tragic stories those vulnerable women must have had! And what a tragic end came to those two priests.

**An appeal to victims**

And now, before I close, if you have been taken advantage of, if you have been abused by someone claiming to be a Christian, and ESPECIALLY if that person was a Christian leader, I want to speak directly to you.

Whether it was one time, or countless times over a period of years, whether you had one abuser or multiple abusers, nobody but God fully understands what that has meant in your life. You may resonate with the question in Lamentations 2:13 (NLT), “Your wound is as deep as the sea, who can heal you?” The answer is: God can!

You may think, “But if THIS system of thought (hold up the Bible) produces THIS kind of behavior, I want nothing to do with it!” Your reaction is understandable, but that behavior misrepresented the Bible’s system of thought and misrepresented God! My friend, haven’t you already suffered enough and lost enough? Don’t let your abuser also rob you of your faith! Get back into THIS (hold up the Bible). Get in deeply with God because this is where you find your truest, fullest healing!

When you have been wronged, it is helpful for your healing to receive an apology. However, your abuser may never give you a meaningful apology, and you probably won’t ever get a call from a conference president with an apology like Sarah did. May I apologize to you? On behalf of the body of believers in the world church, my church, OUR church, I apologize for the pain that one of our members, maybe one of our leaders, brought to you. It should never have happened to you!

* Your abuser had the audacity to abuse you; Now I want you to have the TENACITY to heal.
* Your abuser has had the audacity to pretend it didn’t happen, and/or didn’t matter; I want you to have the TENACITY to say it did happen, and it does matter.
* Your abuser may have had the audacity to go around like some kind of Super Christian; I want you to have the TENACITY to go around as a REAL Christian, with all the dignity and joy it implies!

Friend, don’t let this experience define you or determine the rest of your life. The church and the world need you. God needs you. He needs your energy, your perspective, your God-given gifts. God has a place for you in His Kingdom AND a place here on earth where only you can make the difference that He has in mind, so… pursue healing, seek help, and move forward! It’s time!

**An appeal to Abusers**

And if you are guilty of abuse, what will be your response today? You can go to God as you are, confess all to Him, accept His gift of forgiveness, and then, decide to follow Him. Seek and accept God’s help and professional help. God’s strength, grace and peace will help you face the consequences. Now is the time!

**An appeal to all**

You may have never experienced abuse, yet you have heard about it today. What will you do with what you have heard? How will you respond to someone who suffers from abuse? How will you respond to the abuser?

Whether you are the victim, the abuser, or the bystander, Jesus, our Good Shepherd, can heal your physical and emotional hurts, feed you spiritually, and give you peace. A shepherd cares for his sheep by healing them, feeding them, and leading them beside still waters.

“Seeing the crowds, [Jesus] felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36, NASB). Jesus responded with compassion. I invite you to look to the Good Shepherd and respond with compassion as He did.

He provides everything they need. As you ask Him for help and healing, claim these promises:

“Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in the fold of His robe” (Isaiah 40:11, NASB).

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11, NIV).

“For the Lamb on the throne will be their Shepherd. He will lead them to springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:17, NLT).

**Let’s Pray**

Dear Father in Heaven, How your heart must grieve over the abuse that goes on in our world, and even in our church. Forgive us, Lord, for not paying closer attention. Open our eyes and give us wisdom and courage to make a difference for the future. Most of all, heal us, Lord. All of us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

—end of sermon—

# Workshop

Sarah’s Diary

Written by Ann Hamel and Cheri Corder

August 26, 2023

**Section One**

**Introduction to the video**

Welcome to this workshop based on a video, Sarah’s Diary. Sexual Abuse is always damaging. It is particularly damaging when it is perpetrated by someone who claims to be a follower of Christ.

The following presentation depicts a true story, a story that happened in one of our own Seventh-day Adventist schools. It happened to a woman that I know personally, a woman that I will refer to as Sarah, even though Sarah is not her real name. Sarah came to me several years ago seeking help in dealing with the impact of abuse that had happened in her life many years previously. In this presentation Sarah’s story is told through the reading of a diary she kept as a 14-year-old girl. Sarah has been willing to share her story in the hopes that it will not only give us insight into how something like this can happen - but how it can be prevented. We also hope that in hearing her story we can gain insights into how we, as a community of faith, as the body of Christ, can most effectively respond to a victim of abuse.

You have been given a handout with questions to consider as you now listen to her story. It will take approximately 25 minutes to listen to 15 of her journal entries, spanning a period about 18 months.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, We invite the presence of the Holy Spirit to be with us as we listen to Sarah’s story. We pray that you will open our hearts and minds to Your leading as we listen. In the name of our dear Savior, Jesus, Amen.

*Facilitator: Present the video.*

**Section Two**

**Reaction to the video**

Wow! Now I want each of you to sit for a moment and examine your feelings. What is your reaction to hearing Sarah’s story? Emotionally? Cognitively?

How would you feel if Sarah were your daughter or your granddaughter? Or perhaps your mother or the neighbor girl next door?

How would you feel if the principal, Mr. M. was your husband or your son? Or perhaps your boss or work colleague? Mr. M. was each of these to someone.

Luke 17:2 says that “it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone hung around your neck than to cause one of these little ones to fall into sin” (NLT). Do you think this text applies to sexual abuse? Does it apply to a 14-year-old girl?

**Section Three**

**Statistically Speaking**

The prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA) is difficult to accurately access for two reasons:

1. It is likely underreported. This is particularly true in cultures where the girl, regardless of her age, is blamed for the abuse. Males are also less likely than females to report abuse.
2. Definitions of what constitutes CSA differ from country to country, state to state, and thus study to study.

However, according to the Centers for Disease Control in the United States

About 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys in the United States experience child sexual abuse.

According to the World Health Organization

1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men report having been sexually abused as a child.

These statistics are not substantially different within the wider body of the Christian church or even within our own Seventh-day Adventist Church. While physical abuse is more common with boys and sexual abuse is more common with girls, far too many boys and girls are both physically and sexually abused. Far too many children, in every culture around the world, are subjected to various types of abuse during the formative years of their lives. This abuse has an impact on their developing brains. Many grow up to be broken and hurting men and women who go on to hurt and abuse others.

Most child sexual abuse, 91% of the time, in fact, is committed by someone the child knows and trusts. Often, the child or adolescent is lured into an illicit relationship. The child is often led to believe that there is a special bond between them and their abuser. Generally speaking, men and women who sexually abuse children are people who we as church members, as families, also know and trust. On the surface, they appear to be indistinguishable from people who are trustworthy.

Sarah was 14 when she was groomed by her charismatic and “highly spiritual” middle school principal. The abuse continued through an entire school year and into the next year, with occasional incidents in the years that followed.

The principle claimed to “love” Sarah. He clearly had an emotional attraction and connection with Sarah, but he did not love her in the pure and holy way that God calls us to love each other. He enjoyed the “pleasure” of the relationship without any level of responsibility or commitment to Sarah.

What goes through the mind of a man or a woman who would initiate an illicit relationship with a young girl or a young woman? What moral and societal barriers in their hearts and in their minds have they allowed themselves to cross that would allow them to do such a thing?

A hallmark of sexual abuse is the abuse of power. As an adult and as her principal, along with his role as a spiritual leader in the school, Mr. M. wooed and charmed and ultimately seduced Sarah. She was flattered by his attention and enjoyed his affection.

What responsibility do we have, as “a community of faith,” to ensure that this kind of abuse does not happen in our churches, our schools, and our homes? Legally, Sarah was a minor. Most countries and cultures around the world condemn sexual contact between an adult and a minor and define it as a criminal offense. As a community of faith, do we clearly understand our responsibility to ensure that we have policies and practices in place that protect our children?

Take this time now to discuss steps that your church should take and that you should take to protect your children and teens from abuse.

**Section Four**

**Conclusion**

To prevent the abuse of our children and young people, and also the vulnerable of all ages within our congregations, we must recognize, first, that it is our responsibility to care for and protect them. The major risk comes from within. The Bible speaks of wolves in sheep’s clothing. It is found that 91% of abuse is committed by someone that not only the child knows and trusts but by someone that we know and trust—a wolf in sheep’s clothing. We must make the security of our children and young people a top priority. And I repeat, the major risk comes from within our families and our own congregation.

Most people who become abusers are blinded to the impact of what they are doing. But blindness does not occur suddenly. Today we hope that your eyes have been opened. We hope that we can all see a very clear line of distinction between what is right and what is wrong. We cannot excuse crossing boundaries or rationalizations of any kind when it comes to a sexual relationship between an adult and a child.

But although the line separating right from wrong is clear and distinct, that line is not a narrow line but rather a broad grey line containing many behaviors that may be seen as safe yet at the same time may not be. That is why Sarah’s dad didn’t immediately recognize the danger of allowing Sarah to take a motorbike ride with the principal. That’s why no one, not Sarah’s parents, not the other teachers, recognized the risk of Sarah staying after school, alone, to work with the principal. That’s why no one questioned him taking her out of class to help him. These are the behaviors that we need to learn to question, the behaviors that we need to become comfortable investigating and challenging.

“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.” Ephesians 1:18, NASB

“Open my eyes so that I may see the wonderful truths in your law.” Psalm 119:18, NIRV

This must be our prayer as we seek to protect our children.

**Closing prayer**

—end of workshop—

1. Passages such as Jeremiah 25:34-38, Ezekiel 34:10, Zechariah 10:3 describe the Lord’s anger with the bad shepherds and His judgment of them for abusing others for their own selfish gain. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Adventist Risk Management training seminar, April 3, 2023. For more information, visit https://adventistrisk.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Whenever an accusation of abuse is raised against any church employee or even volunteer leader in your church or school, it is imperative to contact your conference’s [Adventist Risk Management](https://adventistrisk.org/en-us/home) office immediately. If the person is a church employee, they will likely be put on administrative leave while there is an investigation. If the person is not a church employee but is involved in your church or school, Adventist Risk Management will likely counsel you to pause the person’s ministries and will guide you through that process. Should the accusations be determined to be credible, then regardless of the level of influence this individual has in the church or community, regardless of how much everyone loves them, he or she will need to be released from positions of responsibility or influence within the church. Steps must also be taken immediately to limit his or her access to the known victim as well as other potential victims. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. White, Ellen G., *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898), 566.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)