



# HURTING, HEALING, (W)HOLE:

## RENEWED PURPOSE FOR TRAUMATIZED RELIGIOUS LEADERS

**PAMELA PATER-ENNIS**, FOUNDER AND CEO, HUDSON RIVER CARE & COUNSELING, TEANECK & HOBOKEN, NJ FOUNDER AND CEO, MY SANCTUARY HEALING \* **FAYE BANKS TAYLOR**, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND FIELD EDUCATION, DIRECTOR OF FIELD EDUCATION AND CAREER SERVICES, NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

# WHY THIS TOPIC?

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If you are here, you know that there is a much-needed discussion around this topic of religious leaders and trauma

The statistics are alarming, and have only become more pronounced when the COVID epidemic exacerbated the existing trends in congregations, causing more frustration and anger on the part of both religious leaders and congregations

# STATISTICS OF RELIGIOUS ABUSE

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(Slade, D. M.; Smell, A.; Wilson, E.; Drumstra, R., 2023, *Global Center for Religious Research*)

- 27-33% of US adults have experienced religious abuse at some point in their lives
- 90% of people who responded to this survey knew someone who had suffered from some type of religious trauma

(Barna, 2021)

- 38 % of surveyed full-time religious leaders have considered quitting

# LET'S TAKE A MOMENT TO DO SOME DEFINITIONS

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- SPIRITUAL ABUSE
- RELIGIOUS ABUSE
- ADVERSE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
- RELIGIOUS TRAUMA
- RELIGIOUS TRAUMA SYNDROME

# SPIRITUAL ABUSE

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When individuals, outside of a particular religion, are controlled by someone's promise that following a particular ritual or a way of life will make them more whole or more a part of a community (e.g, Jim Jones, nonreligious cults). Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse can be in the mix as well.

# RELIGIOUS ABUSE

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When individuals are controlled by others, using coercion and manipulation through God-language and scripture over a period of time. Some types of religious abuse are (but this list is by no means exhaustive):

- Being criticized due to dress, make-up, jewelry
- Being shunned and/or disciplined due to sexual or gender identity
- Being victim of prejudice due to institutional racism
- Being financially abused by a church leader(s)
- Being sexually abused by a church leader
- Being gossiped about, openly criticized, libeled, or slandered

# ADVERSE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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When a single event happens to an individual that causes him/her harm in a religious context (this list is by no means exclusive):

- Being yelled at publicly in a church meeting or called out in worship
- Being gossiped, slandered or libeled in a religious context
- Being harassed sexually or sexually abused by a religious leader or congregant
- Being sexually abused by a religious leader
- Being financially abused by a religious leader
- Being condemned or ostracized for clothing, lifestyle, sexual identity, gender identity, ethnic identity, or racial identity

# RELIGIOUS TRAUMA

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When an individual is controlled by another person who uses God-language or scripture to have power over him or her over a period of time. Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse can be in the mix as well, as in the case of religious abuse. But in the case of someone who has experienced religious trauma, the individual has or is currently experiencing a wounding that encompasses exposure to other crises event and multiple violations that set the stage for the development of chronic wounding.

(Halligan & Yehuda, "Risk Factor for PTSD," in Baldwin, 2018) "A person's vulnerability and biological risk factors that encompass socioeconomic level, history or prior mental health distress, level of education, heart rate variability, and dynamics within family of origin."



# RELIGIOUS TRAUMA SYNDROME

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- In the next DSM, there is a movement of mental health professionals lobbying for “religious trauma syndrome” to become a coded term that can be used for insurance billing
- In the DSM-5TR (2022), there is a distinction between chronic and acute post-traumatic stress disorder, and in this same vein, there is a continuum between an acute event that becomes a chronic state of being if the individual has other history adverse traumatic events, and does not receive adequate treatment to resolve his/her PTSD symptoms

# RELIGIOUS TRAUMA IS MULTI-DIRECTIONAL

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Religious Trauma is multi-directional:

1. Some religious leaders have the capacity to abuse their congregants
2. Some religious leaders have been abused by their congregants
3. Vicarious trauma vs. direct trauma

# REASONS FOR TRAUMA OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

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(Barna, 2021) These issues were all exacerbated by the decreasing respect for clergy and lowered religious attendance, compounded by the impact of the pandemic in 2020-2021, as well as the split political/theological issues in the US since 2016

- Few boundaries
- Required to be skilled in multiple skill sets (e.g, public speaking, musical, mediator, counselor, community organizer, office administrator, business manager, educator, host)
- Low pay
- High expectations

# RELIGIOUS LEADER POPULATIONS THAT ARE AT GREATER RISK FOR BEING TRAUMATIZED

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- Persons of color
- Disabled persons
- Women
- LGBTQ+
- Individuals who are change agents in their communities/congregations

# THE 3-STAGE PROCESS OF BRINGING RENEWED PURPOSE TO TRAUMATIZED RELIGIOUS LEADERS

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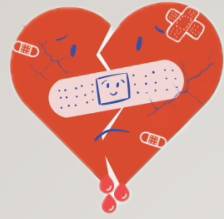
- HURTING- steps 1-4
- HEALING- steps 5-13
- (W)HOLE- steps 14-17

# HURTING



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- to cause bodily injury to
  - to cause bodily pain to
  - to affect adversely
  - to harm
  - to cause mental pain to
  - to offend or grieve

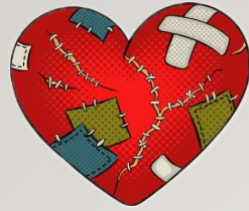
# HEALING



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- curing or curative; prescribed or helping to [heal](#).
  - growing sound; getting well; mending.
  - the act or process of regaining health:

[www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

# (W)HOLE



HOLE	WHOLE
Opening, aperture	Sense of belonging
Hollow place	Ability to be in a hallowed place
Solitary confinement; extreme loneliness	Sense of completeness
Embarrassing or shaming predicament	Unbroken, undamaged, repaired



# HURTING STAGE:

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1. Growing awareness that something is wrong and feeling “burned out”
2. Noting that symptoms of mental health (ie., depression, anxiety, hypervigilance, anger suicidality) are getting worse
3. Having performance issues
4. Reaching out for help

# HEALING STAGE:

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5. Telling his/her story(ies)
6. Identifying as a trauma survivor in exploring somatic, psychological, relational, financial, and spiritual domains
7. Continuing to tell stories of being hurt and being abused
8. Doing a cost-benefit analysis of leaving ministry/leaving the institutional church
9. Finding new community, away from current congregation
10. Beginning forgiveness work with abusers, self, God
11. Accepting that the abuse happened
12. Deconstructing view of God
13. Committing to seeking new meaning in relationships, career, ministry, church, God, etc.

# (W)HOLE STAGE:

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14. Exposing self to a new faith community

15. Exploring a new career or ministry

16. Beginning to help others heal

17. Having hope again

# OTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR A HEALTHY MINISTRY

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- Spiritual direction
- Psychotherapy with a religious trauma specialist on a weekly or bi-weekly basis
- Participation in a Religious Abuse Therapy Group for traumatized leaders
- Church mediation
- Nutritionist
- Regular exercise
- Daily spiritual practice
- Sabbatical
- FMLA

# REFERENCES

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