

Pentecostal Church Allegedly Covered Up Sexual Abuse for 30 Years

Four women claim men at a United Pentecostal church sexually abused and manipulated them when they were children—and church leadership did nothing to intervene.

Debbie McNulty, Rachel Capacio, Rachel Huff and Rebecca Martin Byrd told The Cap Times that they were groomed at a young age to “accept sexual abuse from men” in Calvary Gospel Church in Madison, Wisconsin.

The men who allegedly abused the women were in their 20s and 30s and were held in high esteem in the church. The abuse occurred between the 1980s and around 2005. Adults allegedly looked the other way when older men pursued young girls in the church.

Katelyn Ferral, the Cap Times reporter who investigated the abuse, says the church’s senior leadership fostered a “culture of manipulation and real fear.” Some of those elders are still in leadership now. Ferral says they told the women not to report the sexual abuse because it would sully the reputation of the church and hinder evangelism.

McNulty began a blog in 2017 where she wrote about her experiences in Calvary Gospel. Soon, others began reaching out to her about the abuse they suffered or witnessed at the church.

McNulty was 11 years old when a 29-year-old married man began spending frequent times alone with her, during which he began molesting her. When she was 12, he tried to rape her. When McNulty told the pastor at the time, John Grant, he told her he would get back to her and never did.

"He frames what he did to me as adultery, not as pedophilia," McNulty told 27 News.

Last year, McNulty wrote on Twitter that the church extended grace to her abuser, but not to her.

I left the church because my sexual abuse was never dealt with. There was grace for a 31-year-old man but not for a 12-year-old girl. #EmptyThePews #YouDontKnowEvangelicals

– Debbie McNulty (@DMcNulty70) March 12, 2018

Byrd says her abuser started pursuing her romantically when she was 10 and he was 27. He started sexually touching her when she was 12 and then raping her when she was 14. Each time he raped her, she says, he would force her to kneel with him and recite Psalm 51. She was humiliated.

"When I first told my pastor, he told me that if I told my story, it would ruin my perpetrator's life," Byrd says. "It would make the church look bad, and if the church looked bad, then people wouldn't come to church, and if people don't come to church, then they don't get saved.

Byrd eventually asked that they marry so that the sexual activity would no longer be sin. Ten years later, she divorced her husband and became a single mom.

Laura Anderson watched with concern as an older man pursued her 9-year-old daughter. When Anderson and her husband presented their concerns to Grant, they say he did nothing. When Anderson's daughter was a teenager, she and the man began sleeping together, and the church shunned her.

Calvary Gospel Church's current executive pastor John Seidle says the church is reviewing the allegations: "We will continue to cooperate with law enforcement officials."

He also said the church currently has a Child Abuse Prevention (CAP) policy and procedure in place. Ministry leaders and anyone who works with youth must undergo a background check and affirm they understand and commit to CAP training.

The Cap Times reports that clergy are not required to report sexual assault allegations when the information is shared privately. But Rep. Chris Taylor is promoting a bill that would make it mandatory for clergy to report sexual abuse under any circumstances.