

A pastor's #MeToo story

"What can we do to make this go away?" a member of the personnel committee asked.

by [Ruth Everhart](#) in the [December 20, 2017](#) issue



Our culture is facing a new accountability. Each day brings a tale of some powerful perpetrator brought low. Victims tell of unwanted sexual advances that made them feel less than human, less than holy. The stories are not new, but they are newly being heard.

Like so many women, I have unsought expertise in this subject. Decades ago I was raped at gunpoint. Writing a memoir about that event brought me into contact with dozens of other survivors. What strikes me is how our stories echo Tamar's story in 2 Samuel 13. Our agency was stripped from us by multiple men—not only the Amnons who abused us, but the Jonadabs who connived to set us up, and the Absaloms who silenced us, or even exploited our trauma for their own ends. And in church contexts there was all too often a powerful King David, whose abuse of Bathsheba was visited upon the next generation.

I wrote my memoir to reclaim my own agency. Now I have another story to tell. In many ways, this one is even more difficult to set down on paper. The offender was not a stranger who broke into my home, but a person who'd been charged to care for me. This offender was my boss, my senior pastor, the person privileged to lay his hands on me to ordain me to my first call.

Zane Bolinger was the beloved senior pastor of Penfield Presbyterian Church, a thriving suburban church near Rochester, New York, when I received a call to be its associate pastor for children and youth in 1990. "From here you'll be able to go anywhere!" ZB told me the first time we talked. "The sky's the limit!" I felt lucky to receive a first call to such a healthy church. My new boss was a recent widower, 62 years old—twice my age—and serving as the moderator of the presbytery. He assured me I would soon be in positions of power, too.

Ministry was the vocation I desired with all my heart. My husband, Doug, and I relocated to upstate New York with our two daughters, a preschooler and an infant. Doug's teaching credentials did not transfer smoothly so we decided that, for the first few months at least, he would be a stay-at-home dad and I would support the family. We would have to live paycheck to paycheck.

That October, ZB was to preach my ordination service. He said it was important that we get to know each other before that. He took me out for lunch weekly, to nice restaurants, where we talked about church in only cursory ways. Mainly he probed me about my history, especially my story of rape at gunpoint, which I was very private about at that time. He pressed me for details in a way that only the detectives and prosecuting attorney had ever done. ZB wanted to know how I managed to have intimate relationships with men, considering this history. I felt beholden to answer because he was my boss and, I thought, a man of wisdom and power.

Because I was new in town, ZB put together the commission to plan my service of ordination and installation. One member was a clergywoman I met a few days beforehand, to go over some details. I asked her how she knew ZB, and she described him as her mentor. They talked on the phone a few times a week, and he was always ready to listen. Then she went on to say: “Although I’ll tell you one odd thing. Sometimes his breathing pattern is very strange. I can’t help but wonder if he’s, you know”—she made thrusting motions—“under the desk while he talks to me.” My jaw dropped at this shocking announcement. But part of me was not shocked. Then we laughed the way girlfriends do and went on to our plans for the service.

I had chosen Hebrews 12—the text about how we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses—as my anchor text. On that pivotal day, ZB preached on that text, then, along with the other witnesses who gathered around me, laid his hands on my head to ordain me. How I hate to recall the whole event.

ZB began to bring me small gifts, such as toys for my daughters. We were so strapped for money that I was grateful for the toys. On one occasion he lent me his car for a longer trip since Doug and I shared one, and I found a carton full of chocolate-covered strawberries on the dashboard. An accompanying note said that he had hand-dipped the berries to make my travel more pleasant.

I was swamped with church responsibilities and was busy in meetings four or five nights a week. The youth group was a problem from the beginning—not the youths themselves, but the youth advisers, who were a group of adult volunteers. My predecessor as associate pastor had been a charismatic man who played the guitar and was likened to Jesus Christ because of his long hair. He had run the planning meetings with the advisers well past midnight, confiscating watches to do so. I also heard that he served alcohol at these late-night meetings and turned the lights out. These all struck me as very strange practices. Personally, I was eager to get our business done and get home to my family.

As I puzzled over the situation with the youth advisers, I asked ZB for advice. He suggested that we go out for lunch so I could relax. He presented me with jewelry that had belonged to his late wife, accompanied by an emotional speech about how much I had come to mean to him. I plunged ahead with my agenda. Were the disturbing things I heard about the history of the youth program true? ZB brushed my concerns aside and ordered dessert. It was at this moment that I could no longer

deny what was happening. ZB's behavior was more like courtship than supervision.

At this time I had been at the church only a year and felt trapped. If I applied to other churches, how would I explain the timeline? No one would hire a failure. Doug was handling everything at home while I was drowning in church duties. How could he take the master's level classes he needed? The reality of being the sole support of a family of four was an enormous weight that I had not expected to shoulder.

A relatively small incident became an opportunity for ZB to escalate the abuse. A church volunteer was peeved that I didn't take a turn at nursery duty on Sunday, saying my family wasn't pulling its weight. Did she not understand my job? On Sundays I was either in the sanctuary or running the Sunday school. Meanwhile Doug was unavailable because I had pressed him into service as the sixth grade Sunday school teacher, a slot notoriously hard to fill.

ZB said he would resolve my problem. An hour later, I was working at my desk with my back to the door when he burst into my office saying, "Don't worry, I've fixed everything!" He was elated. He spun my office chair around, put his hands on either side of my head and kissed me on the lips, a wet kiss. I put my hands on his chest and pushed him an arms-length away as I stood up, saying, "No."

He left, and I shut the door after him, shaking. I felt exploited and afraid. I immediately went home and told Doug what had happened. He was ready to storm over to the church and kneecap the man. Beet-red, he shouted that no man could assault his wife and get away with it. I felt so fearful and vulnerable that I found myself soothing my husband and wishing I had kept silent. When I returned to my office that afternoon there were irises on my desk and a note from ZB inviting me out for dinner.

The forcible kiss was, in one sense, only the culmination of a spiraling pattern of abuse. But in another sense, it changed everything. Now the situation was untenable. A line had been crossed, and I could not pretend, even to myself, that ZB was well-intentioned. He was a predator who had been grooming me.

I established some boundaries about my office space and sought the help of a counselor who was a pastor in another denomination. My counselor advised me to count the costs and stay silent. He reminded me, as if I did not already know, that ZB held all the cards: a position of authority, longevity in the system, a genial demeanor. Meanwhile, the news was full of Anita Hill's allegations against Clarence

Thomas, a nominee for the Supreme Court. It was obvious that things were stacked against women who spoke out.

Still, in late spring 1992 I decided I had no choice but to speak out. I needed help. I called a meeting of the church's inactive personnel committee. There were four members, one of whom was ZB's best friend and golf buddy. Two others had never before attended a meeting. The fourth member was a female therapist who had been assigned to be my mentor. I told the committee that ZB behaved in inappropriate ways, which had escalated to the point of him assaulting me.

ZB acknowledged that he kissed me, saying that he was "excited." I remember that word. He also said it was normal to express affection with a kiss. I countered, saying it had been a kiss on the mouth, not the cheek, and had been forced upon me. I felt so repulsed by him at this point that it was difficult to sit in the same room.

The personnel committee said I misunderstood ZB's actions and that he felt "pure Christian love." I insisted this did not accurately represent what was going on. ZB's best friend said, "What can we do to make this go away?" Meanwhile, another committee member reminded everyone that I was floundering in leading the youth program, claiming that was the real problem at hand. I was embarrassed but also angry that these difficulties—for which I had sought help—were being used against me. The therapist, who was privy to details of my story, violated my confidentiality by telling the committee that I was a rape victim. As she informed the group of this, I began to sob in helpless anger. I didn't think that my status as a former rape victim was relevant. However, it lent weight to the suggestion that ZB was kind and I was wounded.

I felt even more helpless at that moment than I had in the aftermath of being raped. When the police showed up in 1978, they had not doubted the account of what happened. Perhaps the imbalance of power was more visible since those offenders had guns and shackles instead of title and position.

His forcible kiss was the culmination of a spiraling pattern of abuse.

Eventually I began to search for a new position and took the first call that came, as solo pastor to a small congregation in rural Illinois. We moved in August 1993. Before the move, Doug and I had many conversations about whether or not I should bring an accusation against ZB. From my past experience as a witness against one of the men who raped me, I feared that I would pay too great a price, or that our

daughters would pay too great a price because of the emotional state I would be in for an extended period of time. Ultimately Doug and I decided to do our best to move on.

Years later, more secrets spilled out from Penfield Presbyterian Church. One of the youths who had reached adulthood accused a former youth adviser, Bob Gomperts, of sexual abuse while he was a minor. Five other victims came forward, the case was prosecuted in criminal court, and Gomperts served jail time. Gomperts had been one of the youth advisers on my watch. I remembered him as full of bluster, forever suggesting that we should hold youth adviser meetings in his hot tub and do without swimsuits “like they do in California.” A report from the denomination shows that Gomperts’s abuses had begun before I arrived at PPC, lessened during my tenure, and resumed again after I left. This timeline gives me some small measure of comfort. Apparently my presence had cooled the system for a time.

Sixteen years after I left Penfield, in 2009, I attended CREDO, a conference designed to strengthen clergy in mid-career. There I was invited to reflect deeply upon my life and ministry. In doing so, I realized that the abuse at Penfield was not just a single incident but had shaped my entire ministry.

I’ve often heard people wonder why women drop out of ordained ministry prematurely or work below their skill level. As I look at the trajectory of my career, I see how I moved to a small church to escape an abusive situation. I chose to protect my husband, daughters, and myself from undue pain. I limited my career options when I could have had a much more visible and public ministry.

It’s said that justice delayed is justice denied, but in this case I decided that justice delayed would be better than no justice at all. The following spring, I brought a formal accusation of sexual abuse against ZB through the ecclesiastical courts of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). An investigating committee found cause to press charges. ZB hired an attorney and fought the charges for some months before admitting guilt to the charge of sexual abuse of another person.

The eventual outcome was that he was formally rebuked in a presbytery meeting. I was not invited to the meeting. ZB did not attend the meeting. It was later reported to me that he told his presbytery golf buddies: “I didn’t do anything wrong, of course. I just pled guilty to get her off my back.”

Having participated in the prosecution of an offender in two different court systems—the criminal courts of the state of Michigan and the ecclesiastical courts of the Presbyterian Church—I can say that the two experiences were completely different. Judge for yourself which court came closer to administering justice.

In the criminal court in 1980, I was able to testify against my abuser and be heard by a jury of my peers. I could look my abuser in the face. I heard a gavel fall and a verdict ring with clarity and power. Guilty! The offender had to pay for his crime with a sentence of life in prison. Once the trial had passed, I received a letter from the state of Michigan thanking me for my willingness to testify, since the court was cognizant that I could have refused to do so, as it was emotionally painful. I also received a check to cover the loss of my stolen goods, including the nightgown which I had been wearing at the time of the rape. The amount of the check was relatively small, but what it signified was enormous: a just society recognizes when harm has been done and makes an effort to compensate victims.

In the ecclesiastical court in 2011, the investigating committee ruled that there was cause to move forward and paradoxically asked me to drop the action. They reminded me that the case was costing precious resources from the denomination I loved. No one mentioned that ZB's hiring an attorney had greatly increased the hours and costs involved in adjudicating the case. I was asked to forgive my abuser, even before he admitted guilt and even though he never apologized or contacted me in any way. Court correspondence focused on whether I had "healed" from the abuse, as if healing, not justice, was the court's main concern. After the verdict I was not invited to be present at the imposition of rebuke. When I called presbytery officials I was treated scornfully. I never received a letter thanking me for my willingness to prosecute and certainly never received any compensation.

In the six years since I brought the charges, I have invested a huge amount of time and energy pondering the issues of shame, gender, and power. All that effort can feel like a very unreasonable expenditure because it was not chosen. Yet having spent the time, I have come to believe that churches are accustomed to viewing any story that touches on sexuality as a personal matter between an individual and God even when it is an abuse of power, hence a matter affecting the community.

The sad truth is that men in power are still prone to hang on to every vestige of it. Just as the men around Tamar stripped her of agency—either maliciously or unthinkingly—the church is quick to silence women. Those who aren't the actual

abusers are often invested in aiding the abuser or in profiting from the abuse. Meanwhile there is a cascade of violations—as with a culture of boundary violations flowing out to the abuse of youth.

The question the church needs to ask itself is really quite simple: Why are women considered less valuable than men? Churches cannot respond effectively to sexual harassment and assault until we know the answer to that question. If we truly believe that women are image-bearers of God, why is the issue of sexual violence treated as a pink issue?

Yet I have hope. If churches can find the courage, they have the resources to open up these issues. Imagine what would happen if every preacher told the story of Tamar and examined it as instructive for the church. Imagine if every church exposed the abuses it hides. Imagine if every elder told a #MeToo story, either as one victimized or one victimizing. Imagine if we explicitly addressed our discipleship in relation to gender dynamics.

If each church were to do these things, the foundations would shake. The church would be transformed by the Tamars who have stories to tell, stories that can no longer be silenced by powerful and predatory men. What would rise up would astound us all: emotion, energy, outrage—even justice.

Read the author's list of [ways churches can fight sexual assault](#).

A version of this article appears in the December 20 print edition under the title “A pastor’s #MeToo story.”