

Speaking out about sexual assault

Survivors are in our pews—and pulpits.

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Sexual assault doesn't just happen to those who sit on airplanes next to—or who enter beauty contests sponsored by, or who marry, or who work for—powerful men who have a sense of sexual entitlement and a belief in their impunity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that one in five women and one in 71 men in the United States will be raped at some point in their lives, and the incidence of other forms of sexual violence is even higher. Particularly vulnerable are children, LGBT people, Native Americans, incarcerated people, and students on college campuses (where more than 90 percent of sexual assaults go unreported).

As stories about sexual assault erupted in the last weeks of the presidential election campaign, along with debates about what constitutes power and who really says what in locker rooms, a space opened up for communities of faith to address the realities of sexual assault. This conversation is necessary because silence in the face of pervasive sin is a form of complicity.

It's also necessary because survivors—and perpetrators—of sexual assault are members of our congregations. They're our pastors. They're the children we've baptized and confirmed. They're our lay leaders and choir members. They're us.

Religious institutions and faith communities have not always had the best track record in naming, condemning, and effectively countering sexual assault. In 2014,

when President Obama launched the [It's On Us](#) initiative, which aims to make college campuses places where sexual assault is unacceptable and bystanders are encouraged to intervene, many Christian colleges eagerly joined the program. At the same time, some of these same colleges found themselves responding to allegations that their policies for dealing with campus sexual assaults were inadequate.

What if the standard response to such allegations were to engage in the Christian practice of public confession: naming sexual assault as a sin, enumerating how often it happens in one's own community, condemning it and the culture that supports it, and redoubling efforts to eliminate it?

Some congregations are working to create spaces for people to talk about their experiences of sexual assault and the misogyny that undergirds it. Pastors are increasingly speaking about its prevalence and impact, as well as finding ways to provide spiritual support, alongside the medical and legal systems that survivors turn to for healing and justice. Even with those efforts, many who have experienced sexual assault do not feel safe discussing it publicly. Talking about an assault can be an occasion for relived trauma. Many people choose [never to disclose](#) their experience, and that choice is legitimate.

Still, there's power in speaking about sin and in revealing what is hidden. The politicians, commentators, and survivors who have spoken out in recent weeks have opened up a subject that begs for a much deeper, franker engagement. As Obama's initiative reminds us, this work is up to each of us.

A version of this article appears in the November 23 print edition under the title "Sexual assault—it's on us."