

Let’s End the Stigma: Share Your Mental Health Story

PTSD in the Faith Community

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When my chest becomes heavy, my heart races and my body shakes uncontrollably; I know I am descending into my silent hell. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is normally associated with our returning veterans of war. However, PTSD may affect sexual assault survivors or others who have had a severe trauma experience. PTSD is debilitating and can happen without warning. It may happen soon after trauma or years later.

My descent to a silent hell began in 2014 as I served in mission in the country of Peru. I taught ESL at a school founded by an American missionary in 1892. I had less than 36 hours left in service. I had spent that fatal day sorting and packing 18 months of travel and service into two suitcases preparing for my departure. The headmaster came to my apartment to offer food and time to complete my final paper work for Global Mission. I welcomed the offer. That night as he grabbed me “no” was not no, “stop” was not stop, and “don’t” was not don’t. My attacker was responsible for my safety. He held power within the Peru church. That night he stole my joy, my ability to trust, and the ability to speak out.



I traveled to Ecuador for a week of rest. I walked the streets entering the first church I saw. I sat in front of a life-size crucifix and could not hold back the tears. It was there I shouted to my God in prayer all the anger I felt. God where were you that night? Why God, why? I was on mission! I cannot say how long I sat there. I stood up feeling peace and a call to go back to Peru. My response to God was “no way in hell!”

Home from mission I shared the joy of service with a smile on my face. I kept the assault a secret till I could no longer control my anger; my nightmares; my depression. I called a pastor in panic who had supported me while on mission. His response “I can’t help you, it’s beyond my expertise.” It was up to me to find help and and maintain my faith.

In December 2014, I learned a young woman was to serve at the school in 2015. She said I had inspired her to leave her country and teach in Peru. I knew we would be security for each other. Working with a counselor I told a Volunteer In Mission, serving in Peru, about the assault. She immediately told me she would be at the school when I returned. I then had a donation given to me. The giver told me “your face lights up when you talk of the students and your work there.” I had not asked for any of these things. I felt God had nudged each of these individuals to help me return. I returned to Peru with faith, fear, and a contingency plan.

When I returned home in 2015 I felt I had done all God had called me to do. I moved forward with my life and found joy in serving in the church and finding new interests. Life was good. I put the assault behind me.

Then came the presidential election and I found myself slipping backwards, free falling at a very fast pace. I did not understand what was happening to me. I attend an evangelical church and could not understand how the white male evangelical Christian could vote for our now president. I could not understand how a Christian voted for a man who spoke so openly of sexual assaulting women and much more.

I began to isolate myself. My nightmares and anger returned. I no longer attended church. Sitting next to someone or have them touch me was too much for me to bear. I no longer enjoyed church or other activities. I no longer could concentrate or manage basic chores. I suffered in silence. PTSD had taken hold.

I finally found the courage to share with a church friend. She encouraged me to seek further help. The Crisis Center in my area provided full services for assault survivors including treatment for PTSD. I joined a support group and sought medications. I found the courage to share my assault and illness with my woman’s group at church. I began to tell my story for the Crisis Center tours. The Center informed me they were having difficulty bringing information to the churches on the services they provide. I have learned in the faith based community many will work to end human trafficking, but will stay silent on sexual assault. I agreed to reach out to my denomination. I approached the leaders who oversee our conference churches to inform them of the assault and ask for a program to educate pastors on the resources available. I found them more concerned for the church and a possible lawsuit, then for my well being. Their response accentuated my PTSD.

Mental illness is rarely understood by those that have not experienced severe depression. My faith tells me it is not God’s will; it is not to make me stronger; it is not something that can be put aside. I have heard each of these reasons from people of faith. My faith tells me that man has free will to choose good or evil action. My faith tells me God shows a way forward. I ask for God’s help in educating others on an appropriate response within the church. Pastors need an understanding of resources and how to speak with a survivor before a survivor walks into their office. They should have knowledge of counselors specializing in assault or PTSD treatment. A pastor should have resources to help a survivor continue in the faith community. I fight PTSD each day. I struggle to remember the joy of mission. Angels within my church sit with me as I attend service and work toward healing.

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