

## **Listening Session July 20, 2023**

**Location: Dannie & Suzanne Thompson (Franklinton N.C.)**

**Moderator: Dannie Thompson**

### **Dannie Thompson**

Before we get started, I'll start by saying that Suzanne got involved with this right from the start. We get calls and emails from victims daily. I've been kind of on the sidelines just being supportive and I spend a lot of time obviously on the couch (due to my injury) because I can't move around. I have had a long time to contemplate what's going on. I'm just trying to figure this out because obviously this issue is at the top with the overseers of the ministry. It's been going on for over 40 years, you know. [Corrected later to around 100 years]

By the way, if you want a copy of victims letters, you can get them here (stack of hard copies) because there's too much to get covered in one session. I'll just read a few here.

### **Victim one**

Okay so this is a young lady named Laura. She was in the work when this happened, so I'll read this: "I was around 22 years old and had been in the work for about 2 years and 3 months when I was raped by Leslie White at convention (in the nursery) in Colorado in 2003. I was threatened that I would be put out of the work if I ever spoke up and that no one would ever believe me.. that they would believe him because of who he was. I still remember the sound of that door shutting. I shoved the trauma under to survive and went on about my life and never said a word. I was called to go into the work and I didn't want to have to leave and I definitely didn't want to be told I couldn't go to meetings, plus Leslie was my overseer. He was the one making the plans for my life. So who was I supposed to turn to? So, I just pretended everything was fine and believed I was until 2011. I returned from working in Finland and Scandinavia and I was not feeling well at all. I really hadn't been sleeping for quite some time because I didn't feel safe. I was very sick and felt like my body was shutting down. It felt like it was saying "you're not taking care of me so I'm not working for you anymore." I went to the Yorktown convention that year and found out shortly beforehand that Leslie was supposed to be there at some point. In the dining area, he cornered me and asked if I was still keeping silent and I said "yes." I ended up speaking in the same meeting as him."

### **Victim two**

(Another disclosure published on Wings) "Our child was a victim of CSA. Our child's abuser took it farther and suffocated our child, leading to brain damage. Our child will never recover from what happened. This has affected our family in ways no one could possibly understand. It's not

just the therapies and counseling that is needed. It has taken a mental and emotional toll on our entire family.”

## **Comments and Statistics**

### **Suzanne Thompson**

This crisis has taken a mental and emotional toll on so many of us. Just to kind of get an idea of the scope of the problem, Cynthia Liles, the private investigator, told me when I checked in with her today that over 500 perpetrators in our fellowship have been identified. The hotline has been up for just a little over 4 months and in that time over 500 perpetrators have been reported. The Advocates report that perpetrators average about 117 victims each. (Suzanne followed up later to add that this number seems high because we have so many **serial predators** in our fellowship, and that serial predators average as many as 400 victims each in their lifetimes.)

There are reports coming in daily. One thing I think I should mention too is that only around 30% of sexual abuse ever gets reported, and there is very little chance of it ever getting prosecuted... very small chance of anybody ever going to prison. Less than 5% of the CSA allegations that are made actually turn out to be false. Most of those false allegations tend to be in child custody cases where one parent has encouraged lying against the other parent to get custody of a child. Close to 100% of perpetrators will deny their inappropriate behavior / crimes when confronted.

### **Greg Swenson**

Thank you, Dan and Suzanne. Thank you for having us at your house tonight and thank you all for being here and helping us discuss such a difficult subject.

As has already been stated about the scope of this problem, it's very, very big and it's very, very unacceptable. So on behalf of the ministry, we want to issue an apology to all of you for the very great mishandling of many, many cases of child sexual abuse and sexual abuse which have happened over the years.

We are in a season now to address what to do, so that we can do the right thing now, even though the wrong things have been done many times in the past. Even though many times the offender was believed at the expense of a victim who is discounted, we are trying to be educated and to learn the psychology of an offender. We can be drawn into their charm and charisma and be deceived. I need to understand that and how a victim may present in a way that sometimes seems unstable or hard to understand. The most important thing that we can do is believe them, and acknowledge them, and so we want to be doing that.

I offered my life in the work to God through a man named Leslie White. (Suzanne T. did, as well.) So this is very personal to each of us. We realize often that we are very poor judges of character. I also want to mention that I was speaking to a survivor a couple weeks ago. She brought up the fact that there are many kinds of abuses, not just sexual abuse. These include

psychological abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse, spiritual abuse, and racism—which is also abuse.

I don't know if this has ever been done or said before by the ministry, but I do want to say, on behalf of the ministry and the fellowship, that we also are very sorry and apologize for any time and all the times that there have been words said in disrespect, actions that have been racist, and judgments that have been passed that have been racist. We do not condone that, we condemn that, and we are wanting to be like Jesus and like God, who taught us to love all and that we are all God's children.

### **Jared Synder**

My part in these sessions has been referred to as “the process”. The process involves repentance, which means realizing how we've been wrong in the first place. One of the things that I feel bad about is all the times that victims have been given reason to question God and Jesus because of the way their disclosures of abuse have been handled. We need to understand that it's much less important to defend the ministry than to uphold the name of Jesus, and what's true and right. The name of Jesus is still a worthy name to defend.

I have a friend that God helped me to realize I owed an apology to, and I was able to connect with that friend and apologize. I'll spare you all the details, but she texted me yesterday out of the blue and just said, “Sending you smiles; hoping you have a good day.” You can't put a price on that, and there's a lot of people out there like that. We feel bad that we've been part of a system, and that I've been trying to bring people into a system that harms them instead of helps them, and we just want to learn how to fix that. It should not be that way; that is not who Jesus is. The number of an average 117 victims per perpetrator is very disturbing.

Our process of repentance involves realizing that we have been wrong in the first place. I feel bad that most times my goal has been to get someone to meeting or back to meeting without understanding first what caused them to be away from meeting. I have been giving much thought to what the experience of the victims might be. There is a lot to learn, a lot to understand. I don't want to cut the experience short by saying, “I have learned something now; let's get back to business.” It is easy to defend the ministry rather than defend the name of Jesus. Greg heard from a survivor who said that it took 20 years before hearing the name of God and Jesus didn't trigger them.

### **Mindy Yule**

I want to say a very special thank you to our therapists. We have some here in our audience and all over the country who are offering their help. We appreciate it. We have felt ourselves wanting to reach out also and give any support we can give. We are learning that we are not therapists. We are not professionals. We want to offer any bit of support we can and to believe the victim/survivors.

There is so much that we can do in being more aware. I was so impressed with the session we had on Monday [the Worker's SA/CSA Workshop] and with all the presenters who shared with us. One of the most outstanding things that was shared regarding victims and survivors is that through the process of their receiving help, they can get to the place of being a thriver. I just appreciated that, but what was made so clear is that what it takes to get there is talking, tears and time, and we just think of victim-survivors and what all that takes and how painful it is.

## **Suzanne McCorkell**

We are all grieving. Grieving has so many meanings/parts: shock, denial, pain, anger. We are learning to be patient with each other because we are all grieving, and are in different stages of grieving. We know that these are not just sins; they are crimes, and they need to be addressed.

### **There were back and forth comments:**

- Jared described being paired with Leslie as a young worker in Virginia. Nothing was told to him about Leslie's trail of abuse in other states. (Leslie had been moved to VA because of sexual abuse, and should have been put out of the work, and even prosecuted for crimes against children and adults, rather than being moved again.) Jared recognized that something wasn't right with Leslie, and suffered immensely during that year with Leslie.
- Mindy mentioned having professed in a convention meeting that Leslie White spoke in over 40 years ago.
- Someone on the panel mentioned the injustice (& often, lawlessness) of supporting the appearance of righteousness, which offers protection of the wolf and not the sheep! And the many years that this has been happening!
- One mentioned being troubled by the undertone of fear in our fellowship. A lot of victims and victims' advocates have been put out of this fellowship or left for these reasons.
- Dan: We have been too motivated by fear. A sister worker on another staff said of her overseer: "He scares me." If any of us are fearing workers or overseers, that's a problem! That should not be. Who was afraid of Jesus?

## **Sharer 1**

I am an outsider. I am originally from another state. I had a normal upbringing. I wonder what I've gotten into. I've been thinking lately of that saying, "Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive". The thought of abuse never crossed my mind before this. It's very concerning that Robert Flippo was recently leading a bible study. I don't know if things are going to change if the top doesn't change. This is embarrassing. And this issue of marriage.. If you remarry, you can't take part in the meeting. (He described a situation that clearly wouldn't be how Jesus would have responded.) Talk of convention should be the furthest thing from anyone's mind right now. We have a crisis to deal with.

## **Sharer 2**

There was a little girl who was 14 yrs old and was taken advantage of at convention. As a result, she strayed away from the truth. She knew the way was right and eventually came back. But what a hard time she had. When we have preps, don't let the young girls work by themselves. Have teams who work together. We look up to the workers, but if you are wrong, you are wrong.

## **Sharer 3**

I have many different feelings. My heart went two different ways: (1) Those who did not grow up in truth, (2) Those who knew nothing about this. Thinking of all the things I have been judged for. Just thinking of how I was brought up. I thought when I was little, if I walked out of the house in a pair of pants that I would burst into flames. I married outside of the truth. I had a happier marriage than most people who are in the truth. My daughter is no longer in the truth and this crisis adds new fuel to her fire. So much hypocrisy! All this has been pushed under the rug. We can't sit back and be quiet. We have to talk more. I have been mad, I have been sad. My service is unto Thee, not to anyone in this room.

## **Sharer 4**

We have a culture of looking up to the workers. We really do value the sacrifice of our workers, but the hierarchy of our structure is not something that Jesus intended or planned. These are traditions of man and not the commandments of God. I am eternally grateful for what I have because of going to meetings. We don't want to be idealizing how we do things, but focusing on Jesus and how we shepherd the sheep. All of this has helped me to realize that my focus was on the wrong thing.

## **Sharer 5**

Thinking of those who have suffered their whole lives in silence. Thinking of those who may not ever have reported their abuse. I feel for those who have been victimized by people who have been in a position of trust.

## **Sharer 6**

The latter days are here and everything that Jesus spoke of shall come to pass. It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away. God is greater than Satan. If Satan strikes us down, God will lift us up. Love your enemy and pray for those who despitefully use you. There is no place for evil in the truth.

### **Sharer 7**

This is not a worker problem to fix. This is a problem for all of us to fix. I have been a multiple time CSA victim. I went to high school never feeling that there was hope for me. I hung out with the wrong people, stealing things, making bad choices. [Described ways in which the abuse history put her into this space.] Workers are human. We all have to come together and fix this and make it safe for people to report. The disappointment of betrayal has hurt. I left the truth and did things that I am not proud of. What gave me hope is the ability to forgive—forgive humans, forgive the evil. The act of abuse itself is unforgivable. Until you forgive, you will not be able to find peace.

### **Sharer 8**

I don't know anything but this fellowship. I'm unbelievably disappointed to learn that these things are happening here. The actions of those in authority have been extremely contradictory. It's disturbing to know that some of these perpetrators have been in my home!

### **(10 min Break)**

### **Suzanne Thompson**

Another important point to pay attention to is the “grading of abuse” that people tend to do. Some of our leaders are also unofficially evaluating victims’s abuse. Each victim experiences abuse in their own way. The same type of abusive act will affect each victim differently, depending on so many variables (e.g., history of abuse, who the victimizer is & victim’s relationship with them, how their disclosure was handled, etc.). The only “grading of abuse” belongs to Law Enforcement when evaluating perpetrators (e.g., a sexual offense in the First/Second/Third Degree, etc.).

### **Additional comments concerning convention**

- “Don't let the devil win”
- “The thought of not having a convention terrifies me”

### **Sharer 9**

I've been feeling a whirlwind of emotions. I've been mindful of the need to keep the right spirit... Not sitting in the emotion of anger, because the devil can take advantage of this.

### **Sharer 10**

I hope this can happen in other states. I feel grateful to have you four workers. Thinking of the number of people who have been driven from the way. In the absence of character, we need

policy/guidelines. Even though workers may not be preaching some things any longer (e.g. dress code), they're also not preaching against them.

[To Sharer 10's comment, a brother worker commented on the need of workers to do a better job of clarifying this. So if something is no longer believed or supported (such as buns and skirts for women), workers need to speak to that rather than assuming people know it's no longer endorsed. Otherwise, the assumption remains a part of our culture.]

### **Mindy Yule**

Regarding judging people: What we believe in our hearts is portrayed to others even if we do not verbally speak it. Look at our own hearts, watch my own backyard. We can sense judgment even if it is not spoken.

### **Sharer 10**

Feeling the weight and heaviness of the moment. We have to take time with ourselves. (Revisiting the racism topic) As a kid at convention, I was told by another child that they wouldn't be playing with me anymore because I was Black. That was the first time that I realized that I was Black. I also overheard comments in the bathroom at Shelby between a child and a woman concerning paper that was being put in the toilet. The woman explained to the child that the "colored people" were probably doing it. I used to hate going to convention, but I heard a voice once that said: "You are a sheep that belongs to God."

### **Questions/Comments**

- Is there anything in the guidelines that are being developed to address the need for accountability for the overseers?
- To our young people, you are the future of the kingdom so be strong. We shall overcome if we faint not.