

*Understanding Sexual Abuse: A Guide for Ministry Leaders and Survivors*

Available February 27, 2018

\$16, 192 pages, paperback

978-0-8308-4135-6

Drawing on both his own experience and his wife's experience as survivors of childhood sexual abuse, minister and lecturer Tim Hein offers his expertise, practical guidance, and empathy—both for ministry leaders and for survivors themselves. Hein presents clinical data and resources alongside pastoral wisdom and care, addressing both psychological and spiritual aspects of sexual abuse.

## Understanding Sexual Abuse

It is said that the true test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members.

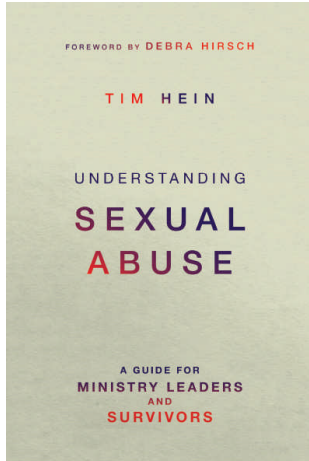
In our society today, it is estimated that up to one in four girls and one in six boys experience sexual abuse during childhood. Experts also estimate that as many as half of the incidents are never reported. Millions of people, both children and adults, face each day with this hidden, complex pain. Leaders and loved ones struggle to understand their experience.

I have experienced this personally; I was sexually abused as a child. I've written this book to inform fellow victims and to help them become survivors. But I'm also an ordained minister, and I want to inform other leaders about this issue. Therefore, what I share is drawn not only from research, but also from my experience as a survivor of sexual abuse and as a Christian leader who has assisted others on this journey. Christian leaders live on the front line of ministry with hurting people. It is crucial that we are informed and equipped to respond. That means we must also learn to walk unafraid into the complexity of this issue. I hope this book can be a useful guide to the nature and trauma of child sexual abuse for both survivors and ministry leaders.

I also know this journey from the perspective of being the partner of a survivor. My wife, Priscilla, endured the abuse of her father. She generously shares portions of her story in this book as well, as well as insights from her knowledge and experience. She is also now a Christian leader, an ordained minister.

Therefore this book is also geared for church and ministry leaders, to prepare them to shepherd survivors of sexual abuse. But it also includes content specifically geared for survivors, and it can be read by both kinds of readers. You will see that often I write as "we" throughout the book. By that I mean you and me—we the survivors, and we the Christian leaders.

*— Taken from the introduction*



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*“Drawing courageously from his own experiences as both a survivor and a long-term church leader, Tim’s careful research is complemented by an empathy derived from his own personal experience. . . . This is a constructive book, navigating the issue with clarity. It is also a courageous book that unpacks the elements of complex trauma and is bold enough to tackle the question of suffering. And – despite the difficult subject – it is a safe book, an essential pastoral resource.”*

– from the foreword by Debra Hirsch

## Tim’s Story

*The exact moment I realized I’d been sexually abused as a child, my family and I were waiting at an intersection in our car. We were on our way to lunch after church. I was fourteen years old.*

*I wasn’t trying to think about it, and no one had mentioned it. It just came to me. I remember looking out the side window, zoning in on the raindrops dribbling down the window just in front of my face. This long moment remains like a still photo in my memory. My mind scanned my memory back and forth, recognizing, confirming. That happened to me. I’ve been abused.*

*As the car began to move forward, I tried to come to grips with this new information. I felt nervous and overwhelmed in my seat. A huge weight seemed to press into my chest, close to my throat. I undid my seatbelt and looked around the backseat.*

*My parents were talking to each other in the front seats, oblivious. To say anything to them was unthinkable. My nervousness shifted to fear, to an almost guilty feeling. As the car drove on, I watched the passing houses and shops, sitting with this new truth, so suddenly and unavoidably present.*

*My young brain had somehow realized, comprehended, this uninvited truth. It would be a long time before I could find the proper words to describe the strange feeling of the painful memories. The closest I can come is that it felt like a shocking, overwhelming sadness. But it was more than sadness. I was unsettled, uncomfortable, and anxious, like I had done something wrong.*

*As the car drove on, I didn’t move in my seat, and I didn’t speak a word about it. I wouldn’t for another eight years.*

Your church is not an exception.

There are victims of sexual abuse in every community and institution in society, including churches. There are certainly victims of sexual abuse in your congregation. One of the serious dilemmas of the subject of child sexual abuse is that while it is incredibly widespread, it is also shrouded in secrecy and even denial. It is often invisible in our congregations because of the silence of the victims themselves. Powerful forces can keep it so, and the shame that victims feel can perpetuate the idea that “good” families are exempt from its reach.

But the now significant body of research agrees that sexual abuse spans races, socio-economic classes, and religious and ethnic groups. Investigations clearly indicate that churches are no exception. Much media attention has focused on the Catholic Church, because of the significant number of clergy who have been found to be perpetrators. I believe we may yet see the full extent of the disclosures elsewhere.

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# BOOK EXCERPT



**Tim Hein** is vice principal and director of discipleship at Uniting College for Leadership and Theology in Adelaide, Australia. He is an ordained minister in the Uniting Church in Australia and speaks and preaches regularly on the Christian faith. He lives in Adelaide with his wife, Priscilla.

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The specific issue of guarding against pedophilia in churches is outside the scope of this book. Even aside from the specific topic of abuse by clergy, we must not be blind to the fact that all church communities can be targets for pedophiles. It is absolutely essential that stringent policies and procedures be implemented in every ministry context, in line with standards set by state authorities and denominational bodies.

Our focus is on cultivating a safe church, where victims can become survivors. For this to occur, we must grasp clearly the fact that many in our congregations suffer in silence. Sadly, I am no longer surprised by who turns out to be a survivor. They are our neighbors, our friends, our colleagues, and certainly our congregation members.

This may seem a rather pedantic point to make to someone who has already decided to read this book. But I risk sounding pedantic for the purpose of clarity: too many people have ignored the issue of sexual abuse. We are beholden to look honestly at this uncomfortable reality, to accept the responsibility that comes with serving a community in a world where this evil occurs, and to be ready and able to respond to that reality. This begins with the clear decision that our church will be a safe place, well informed on the issue of sexual abuse.

*– Adapted from chapter one, “A Safe Place”*