

EXCERPT



The #MeToo Reckoning *Facing the Church's Complicity in Sexual Abuse and Misconduct*

Available January 14, 2020 | \$17, 240 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4582-8

"Rev. Ruth Everhart takes the church to task in what has been an abysmal response to sexual abuse behind its closed doors. Laying out proof of the abuse of the most vulnerable among us in the place that should be the most safe, she gives suggestions for how pastors, congregations, and the church at-large can begin to serve everyone through openness, victim support, and use of the legal system. . . . The #MeToo Reckoning is an engaging, thoughtful, and necessary book in these times that Jesus asks of his church, 'What will you do with me?'"

Lisa Samson, author of *Quaker Summer*, *The Church Ladies*, and *Love Mercy*

#MeToo in the Church

When I graduated from seminary, my husband, Doug, was finishing his teaching credentials, our daughter was a toddler, and I was pregnant with number two. As soon as our second daughter was born, I called the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and requested the list of churches with open positions. While my infant nursed I pored through the computer printouts. Each listing contained a possible new future.

Doug and I were more than ready to become professionals and leave our student juggling act behind. For years, we had passed everything back and forth between us like a four-handed circus performance: three part-time jobs, two sets of professional coursework, and one rattrap car—not to mention taking care of our daughters. We dreamed of the day our family would be settled in a place where he could teach and I could preach. I purposely cast a wide net of applications, feeling excited to entertain a dozen dreams at once. Wherever God called us, we would go.

When our baby was eight months old, a call came from a thriving church in upstate New York, a thousand miles east of our home in Minneapolis. Penfield Presbyterian Church was located in a wealthy suburb of Rochester. I would be the associate pastor in charge of programs for children, youth, and families (which struck me as pretty much everyone). The executive presbyter told me that the position was a "plum." In fact, I would be the first female to serve this prestigious church. Doug and I were ecstatic and deeply grateful to God.

Still, we felt a sense of shock at how quickly the change would unfold and how complicated the logistics would be. We needed to sell our ramshackle house—an old Victorian that cost less than a BMW—and buy one in our new community. We quickly realized that housing prices in Penfield were completely out of our range. We would need two incomes, which meant finding a full-time job for Doug and full-time care for our two daughters.

The church's senior pastor, Reverend Zane Bolinger, phoned. Appearing to be helpful, he volunteered to plan my ordination service and the reception to follow. As he said, it was one chore he could take off my plate.

Bolinger was a long-time pastor, beloved by his congregation. At sixty-two years old, he was twice my age and had recently been widowed. I felt honored that he offered to preach the ordination sermon. I knew that when I knelt for the moment of ordination, he would be the first to lay his hands on my head. I felt thrilled in anticipation of that holy moment.

I couldn't possibly have known that in a year's time Bolinger would lay his hands on me again, with unholy intentions.

* * *

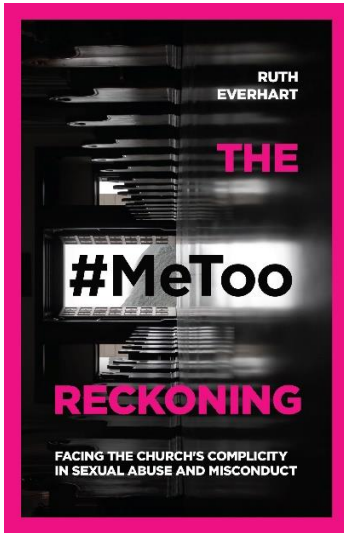
A little more than a year in, Bolinger physically assaulted me. I was working at my desk in my church office with my back to the door. Bolinger had just solved a problem and was elated with himself. He came into my office, spun my chair around to face him, put a hand on either side of my head, pulled me to him, and forcibly kissed my lips. In one reflexive motion, I said, "No," stood up, put my hands on his shoulders, and pushed him away.



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When I shut the door behind him, I was trembling with fury and fear, physically overwhelmed by the realization of my vulnerability. I immediately drove home and told Doug what happened. He threatened to storm over and kneecap the man. Beet-red, he shouted that no man could assault his wife and get away with it. I had never seen my husband so upset. I couldn't imagine him hitting someone with a baseball bat. I was so afraid of losing my job that I found myself soothing him and wishing I had kept silent. When I returned to my office that afternoon—back to work!—a vase of purple irises crowned my desk and a note from Bolinger invited me out for dinner. I was flabbergasted and full of despair.

Bolinger and I did not have dinner. I don't believe we ever ate at the same table again (although we did preside over the Lord's Table together, a monthly tribulation). I did what I could to distance myself from him, such as turning my desk to face the door, and keeping the door shut and locked. After a few days, I worked up my nerve and asked the church secretary to join me in Bolinger's office. I announced to both of them that I would never again be in a room alone with him. It was a rule. The secretary nodded and asked no questions.

The forcible kiss was, in one sense, only the culminating act in an escalating pattern of abuse. But that act changed everything. I couldn't continue to pretend, even to myself, that Bolinger was well-intentioned. I sought the help of a counselor who was an ordained pastor in another denomination. That I had to pay for these counseling sessions myself was salt in the wound. After I poured out my story, the counselor advised me to count the costs and stay silent. He reminded me, as if I didn't already know, that Bolinger held all the cards. Not only was he my boss and well-connected, he was beloved by the congregation.

Meanwhile, the October 1991 news cycle covered the confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas, a nominee for the Supreme Court. Anita Hill, an attorney who had worked as an assistant to Thomas, testified that he had sexually harassed her. I was riveted to the television. Hill's testimony was brave and eloquent. I didn't doubt that she spoke the truth, and at great cost to herself. When the vote confirmed Thomas anyway, I was flattened. The deck was obviously stacked against a woman who spoke out against a powerful man, no matter how well she spoke. The abuser was rewarded, while the woman was vilified.

I wanted to give up, move back to Minneapolis, and have a do-over. But I feared I would never get another position if I left this one so soon, under a shadow. Besides, I liked our little house—which we'd been able to afford because it stood along a minor highway. We had plans to fence the yard and turn the walk-out basement into a playroom. I longed to see our daughters playing there, safe and carefree. I wanted to provide stability for them and for Doug, who was such a trooper. Beyond that, I was simply driven to succeed. And much about my ministry was successful.

I felt trapped, a maddening feeling. Even though I knew it was unfair, I lashed out at Doug. How in the world had I become the sole support of a family of four? It was an ugly time for our marriage as the desperation of the situation contaminated every interaction with guilt, blame, and frustration.

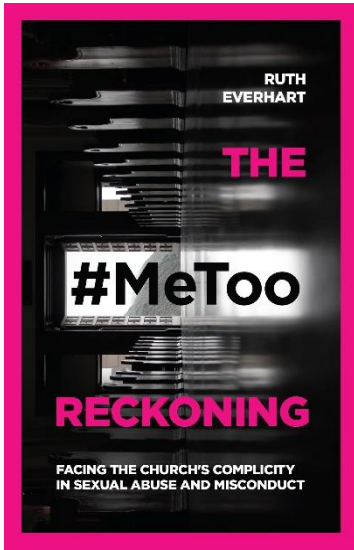
—Adapted from chapter one, "Power and Patriarchy"



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DETAILS



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Ruth Everhart is pastor of Hermon Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland. She earned a BA from Calvin College and a master of divinity from United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. She is the author of *Chasing the Divine in the Holy Land* and the *Christianity Today* award-winning memoir *Ruined*.

“This is a book of reckoning.”

The #MeToo movement has revealed sexual abuse and assault in every sphere of society, including the church. But victims are routinely ignored by fellow Christians who deny their accounts and fail to bring accountability to the perpetrators. All too often, churches have been complicit in protecting abusers, reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics, and creating cultures of secrecy, shame, and silence. Pastor and survivor Ruth Everhart shines a light on the prevalence of sexual abuse and misconduct within faith communities. She candidly discloses stories of how she and others have experienced assault in church settings, highlighting the damage done to individuals, families, and communities.

“I felt called by God to write this book because I am prepared both personally and professionally,” said Everhart. “As a survivor of both sexual assault and sexual harassment, I have done the deep work of processing my own stories. As a pastor, I am passionate about helping other victims and survivors see their stories addressed in Scripture. As a survivor and a pastor, I wanted to tell two kinds of narratives—current survivor stories too often untold, and ancient Scripture stories too often overlooked. My goal was to explore why the church’s response to sexual assault is to deny, ignore, and minimize the assault, rather than to move toward accountability and justice for victimizers and equality and care for victims.”

Everhart offers hope to survivors as she declares that God is present with the violated and stands in solidarity with victims. Scriptural narratives like those of Tamar and Bathsheba carry powerful resonance in today’s context, as do the accounts of Jesus’ interactions with women.

Everhart addresses many issues including:

- One out of every six women is the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime.
- Women are disproportionately likely to be victims of assault.
- People of color suffer higher levels of sexual assault than white people.
- Misogyny is a major issue in the church, as it was during the time of Jesus’ ministry.
- Patriarchy and sexual abuse are linked.
- Secrecy allows the evils of sexual abuse to flourish.

“This is a book for survivors, for churches who have failed victims, for those who seek to mourn with those who mourn, and for those who love justice and endeavor to bring healing and renewal,” said Kristen Kobes Du Mez, professor of history and gender studies at Calvin College. “By weaving together biblical narratives and contemporary stories with her own painful past, Ruth Everhart unflinchingly confronts the culture of silence, shame, and denial that too often characterizes a Christian response to abuse. This is a book of reckoning.”



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