

Abuse That Left a Trail of Pain, Anger, Mistrust

No names were named. No communities were identified. But Synod 2019 delegates heard a story of abuse that left a trail of pain, anger, and mistrust in at least three congregations in three different cities. Seated in front of 180 synod delegates, Rev. Carel Geleynse told his story of picking up the pieces left by an abuser. One week after Geleynse became pastor of a Christian Reformed church, it was revealed that the church's previous pastor had sexually abused a minor. The abuse had occurred years before in a different church, but its shadow loomed large over what was now Geleynse's church.

"The initial response was disbelief, denial, and silence," said Geleynse. "In the formal life of the church, things tended to go on as usual... But behind the scenes, comments started to bubble up. Others began to tell stories. Many didn't tell anything until five to seven years later."

Asked about his reactions, Geleynse said, "I had a range of feelings: shock, anger."

In the face of betrayal, "trust takes a big hit," he said. "There was a hesitancy to trust me or any leader. Did my words match my actions? People were not sure, so they watched and watched and watched."

"There was guilt," Geleynse continued. "People said, 'I did nothing about it.' There were questions: Is God safe if his servants aren't trustworthy? The church ought to be a place of refuge."

Geleynse said it was hard work to regain trust. The church council watched and



Rev. Carel Geleynse, left, talks about the trail of pain, anger, and mistrust that follows abuse.

discussed a film about abuse in the church. "The council learned what sacred listening was about. We learned about not letting things go, naming the issue for what it was."

Some church members had pushed for quick forgiveness. "Quick forgiveness can be incredibly cheap," Geleynse said. "Abuse cuts so deep, and its effects are so far-reaching that one cannot simply say forgive and forget. And there are consequences, too."

Also, "without the (CRC's) Safe Church office, we would have floundered," he said.

The church council visited with pastoral and administrative staff members who had come and gone during the previous pastor's tenure.

All the visits culminated in a weekend of restoration, seven years after the original announcement. "We had a joint sacred listening time with a sister congregation that had also experienced abuse." Now, years later, the process of healing continues, according to Geleynse.

Following this compelling interview, delegates held table conversations about their own experiences with abuse of power in the church.

Stories like the one synod heard often can trigger feelings in those who have experienced abuse, according to Bonnie Nicholas, director of the CRC's Safe Church Ministry. For that reason, volunteers were on hand to talk and pray with anyone who needed support. Several people met with the volunteers, who all had experience of working with abuse survivors.

—Roxanne Van Farowe