

A New Hampshire Pastor's Account of His Arrest for Failure to Report Child Abuse

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While I was serving as the interim/associate minister at Valley Christian Church in New Hampshire, I encountered a situation that would change my life forever. I (along with the elder body) learned about an incident of inappropriate touching from a confidential talk with the victim. Ultimately, we decided to keep that confidence while trying to work for healing in both the victim and the perpetrator. Eventually, we encouraged the perpetrator to “turn himself in” while the victim’s family reported this incident to the police. This all took place over a period of about four to five months.

After the perpetrator confessed to the police, a whirlwind of activity occurred in my life like had never happened before. I was arrested in handcuffs, thrown into a cell, and marched to the courthouse with the cameras flashing from the local and state media outlets. I was given \$5,000 bail, which I was only able to meet after spending a few hours in the county jail. Ultimately, I was charged with “failure to report child abuse” which was classified as a misdemeanor, with a maximum penalty of one year in jail. In the state of New Hampshire, a pastor is a “mandated reporter”, and must report any suspected case of child abuse almost immediately. Technically, I had not reported the abuse, but given the circumstances, I believed that my actions were reasonable. I also believed that it was “allowable” under the law to keep the confidence of a parishioner. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

During this season of my life, the most hurtful things that happened were not necessarily a part of the legal process. I was particularly saddened by all of the false information that was given to the press for publication in the local newspaper. I was also surprised by how many church members left without saying a word to me or my family. Ultimately, the next year of my life was spent trying to work with a church in crisis, trying to deal with the crisis within my own family, and a series of high-profile court appearances, that ended with a “guilty verdict” in December of 2010.

The night of my arrest when my wife picked me up from the county jail, we purposed in our hearts to allow ourselves to learn whatever the Lord wanted us to learn. One of the areas of my life that the Lord did a work in was the area of emotional formation. I was raised in a good Christian home, and for the most part had been shielded from large problems and painful situations. This current situation took me to a new level of personal brokenness and humility, and I

ultimately experienced feelings that I had never dealt with before. All at once, I was dealing with a job/career failure, uncertain financial future, uncertain legal future, and a large amount of scrutiny directed towards me from the internet and local media. Without the support of my wife, my extended family, and my relationship with the Lord, I cannot even imagine what it would have been like.

God has also used this situation to help refine His vocational calling in my life. I originally thought that my ministerial career was over, but I have now since realized that the Lord is able to use this situation to bless and minister to others.

During the year of legal struggles, I continued to serve the church, with their approval, but after the “guilty” verdict I decided to officially step down. I wanted the church to be able to ‘move-on’, and find a leader who had a better reputation within the community. I believe that stepping down was the right decision, but with that also came the fear that I would never be in full-time ministry again.

Looking back over the events that led to my arrest, I wish I had properly reported the event immediately after I found out about it. All that would have been required was a simple phone call reporting the suspected abuse. Nevertheless, I know that God has used this experience to shape my family and I in so many unique ways. Ultimately, God used this experience to draw me closer to Him, and for that I am forever grateful.

In His Service,

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