

Marquand Chapel
April 3, 2006

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Reflection for Sexuality Service

My mom now works for the county as a sexual assault survivor's counselor and advocate. Before that, she was a nurse. So as you can imagine, she's always been open and honest, and insisted that my sister and I have the proper terminology and information about our bodies and babies and sex, even before we could pronounce the words she was teaching us. When trying to recall some anatomy terms when I was four, I asked my mom: "If girls have *overalls*, what do boys have?" So, even though my father and my church were silent on the topic of sex, I didn't feel at a loss for information and support while growing up.

It was during my first year of college that I received a phone call from my sister. I remember it clearly. She was audibly upset, but made me promise to her that I wouldn't tell mom. I agreed, and she went on to describe the following incident which had happened five months earlier: It was the early fall, and she had just been dropped off in front of our house by the school bus. She realized she did not have her keys, so she began walking along the rural road to our neighbors' to get the spare they kept for such occasions. The bus was long gone, but the car which had been following behind it wasn't. The car slowed and stopped by my 14-year old sister, and a man jumped out and pulled her into the backseat. There were three men in the car. The smell of smoke and the sound of rattling beer cans surrounded her. The two in the back seat began taunting her, groping her, and undoing her clothes while the driver encouraged them. She resisted, but was trapped. The assault went on like this for only a few minutes when one of the men shouted: "the cops!" They pushed her out onto the side of the road and sped away. There was not a cop--or anyone else-- in sight.

She had told no one for 5 months, and then tried to talk to our church's pastor. But as detailed as her description was, he accused her of lying. So, the next person she turned to was me. I encouraged her to tell our mom, but she insisted that mom and dad would overreact, and that they would think it was my sister's fault for forgetting the keys. Nor would she visit any of my mom's co-workers at the county office for fear that our mom would find out. I struggled whether or not I should break my promise and tell anyhow. I felt angry. When she reached out for help, the church had failed her. I felt helpless. I was some 300 miles away, and without a car to drive home and be with her. I felt I had failed her as well. I felt confused. Even my mom's openness and information had not prevented this from happening. I felt mom had failed her, too.

What if they hadn't thought they saw a police? What if she had been raped or abducted? What if my 14-year old sister had gotten pregnant by a rapist? Where would she have gone then?

Now it seems that many churches are like mine: practically silent on contentious things like premarital sex, divorce, gay marriage, masturbation, abortion, and contraceptives. What you believe about these things is not my point; this isn't about being "liberal" or "conservative" when

it comes to sex. No amount of condom distribution, no amount of chastity pledges would have prevented this incident from happening to my sister.

Sexual assault happens to conservatives, it happens to liberals. It happens in poor neighborhoods, it happens on wealthy college campuses. It happens in rural Minnesota, it happens in New York City. It happens to women, to children, to men. For every assault that is reported, several more go unreported.

As it turned out, my sister was lucky to have had two supportive parents and a brother who loved her when she did finally tell. Not everyone is so lucky.

So instead, my question is: why did my sister think she could turn to the church in the first place, and why was she so wrong in this case? What needs to change, for churches to continue to be places of trust and healing for people like my sister?