

The sexual harasser in the church soup kitchen

## When a culture of abuse thrives within a congregation

by [Ruth Everhart](#) in the [January 15, 2020](#) issue



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After I began writing about abuse within faith communities, a clergywoman I'll call Stephanie Green reached out to me with her story. She was the associate pastor of a large congregational church in the Chicago suburbs. One morning she noticed her church's name in the local newspaper. The snippet was posted in the police blotter section, the exposed underbelly of suburban life: "Man Banned from Church." Even before she read it, Stephanie knew what the item would say. Her heart sank.

*Banned* was not a word she would choose to link with her church. The congregation she served was welcoming and full of kindness. It ran a soup kitchen, for heaven's sake! *Banned* was such a weighty word, a word of last resort. Still, it was true, and there it was in print. Someone had indeed been evicted from the sanctuary yesterday. Remembering the incident made Stephanie sad all over again.

At the same time, the memory made her feel strangely calm. When she had expressed her feelings of vulnerability and alarm, the senior pastor had called the police. Officers responded with prompt action because Stephanie's physical and emotional well-being mattered. For her, the sanctuary would continue to be a safe place. She knew that many women don't have sympathetic colleagues and responsive police officers. Many women are not protected. Stephanie felt grateful that she was, and she recognized her privilege.

As she tried to sort out her two opposite reactions—dismay and gratitude—Stephanie read the news snippet again. Something unspoken needed her as she recalled the incident.

That previous Sunday, Stephanie had popped into the sanctuary early, around eight o'clock. She would be baptizing an infant during the ten o'clock service, and the cheerful seasonal flowers that lined the chancel steps created an obstacle course. She wanted to rehearse her footwork.

Pretending to hold a baby in her arms, she turned from the baptismal font—and felt eyes following her. Someone was sitting in the front pew, watching her every move. When Stephanie recognized who it was, she felt prickles of alarm. William was one of the homeless men who had frequented the church's soup kitchen until two weeks earlier, when the church leaders had asked him to leave the premises and not return.

The trouble had begun innocently enough, months earlier. As part of her routine, Stephanie often chatted with the men while they waited for their meals. William developed something like a crush on her. He began seeking her out in her office or wherever she might be. Although the soup kitchen had its own dedicated space and the rest of the building was kept separate and locked, William was always able to find her. He appeared to be harmless, but Stephanie felt rattled by these dogged attentions.

Compared to many of the rowdy regulars, William was a teddy bear. Tall and broad, with light brown skin, his soft features might have indicated a disability. His long, unkempt hair was straight and dark. No one knew anything about his background. English wasn't his first language, but he wasn't fluent in Spanish either.

Stephanie's fear had escalated when she realized that William followed her one day when she left the building to grab coffee with a colleague. As she walked back to the

church alone, William appeared out of nowhere, trailing her, and calling out: “Why were you walking with that other man when I’m your boyfriend?” When she got back to the church she found multiple voicemail messages from William, each one longer and more intense.

Stephanie told the senior pastor about the incident, who encouraged her to report it to the police. She did so, saying: “Nothing has happened yet, but this doesn’t feel good.” The officer listened and took notes but had no cause for follow-up. So the church leaders had taken it upon themselves to tell William to stay away. That action, which was no doubt necessary, grieved Stephanie. She felt caught between the pathos of the situation as William probably saw it and her own sense of vulnerability.

On the Sunday when Stephanie discovered William in the sanctuary so early, she felt rattled and frightened. She knew one thing for sure. She couldn’t concentrate with him in that pew. His presence left her quivery and full of self-doubt.

Stephanie alerted the senior pastor that William was in the sanctuary, then shut herself in her study. She told herself that her colleague could handle it and that she should focus on her duties, the baptismal liturgy, and sermon.

When the service was over, others told her what happened. The senior pastor had called the police, who arrived quickly. William protested, “I just want to go to church.” The officers told him, “There are plenty of other churches. You’re banned from this one.” They used that word, *banned*. William resisted, but limply, as they led him away.

Hearing all this, Stephanie felt troubled. She was sure William’s behavior was connected to the atmosphere in the soup kitchen, but she didn’t know what to do about it.

The king of the soup kitchen at Stephanie’s church was Big Joe. His name fit. He wore an enormous white apron and treated everyone like family. Big Joe had volunteered since the soup kitchen’s modest beginnings. As the ministry grew over the years, so had the scope of his responsibilities. Now Big Joe held the title of director even though he, like everyone else, was unpaid.

The soup kitchen had many regulars, both clients and volunteers. Girl Scout troops, confirmation classes, students who needed to earn service hours for school—at

some point they all streamed into the soup kitchen to slice vegetables, assemble sandwiches, or bake sweet treats. On any given Saturday a mix of people would be at work: 16-year-old girls wearing leggings, a men's group sporting Chicago Bears jerseys, and senior women in seasonally decorated sweatshirts. In the controlled chaos of the kitchen, everyone had a task presided over by Big Joe.

Big Joe was affable, calling the men "Buddy" and the women "Honey," or sometimes "Sweet Cheeks." He liked to play the radio loudly and do dance moves while waving his ladle around. The clients loved Big Joe. He dished out oversized meal portions along with out-of-bounds jokes. He liked to gather the men in a group and tell a dirty joke in a stage whisper, delighting in their guffaws. With the laughter still rumbling, he'd pull in some unsuspecting female—a teenager carrying a butter tub, or a senior citizen with a spatula, or Stephanie (if she happened to be nearby)—and repeat the joke, complete with winks at the assembled men. If the woman squirmed or looked uncomfortable, Big Joe only laughed harder. The fact that the kitchen was never empty gave his crass words a safety margin. Who would misbehave in front of so many witnesses? Plus the ever-present noise made it hard to be sure that you heard correctly. The whole situation offered plausible deniability.

Once when Stephanie was passing by the broom closet, out of sight of other people, Big Joe blocked her way, grabbed her wrists, and planted his mouth on her cheek. When she pulled away, he laughed, saying she shouldn't be rattled by a friendly greeting. But it wasn't a greeting. It was a grabbing.

As Stephanie studied the news snippet about William that morning—"banned"—she kept flashing back to Big Joe's actions by the broom closet. In fact, the events with William were causing her to rethink all the soup kitchen dynamics. When she first began as associate pastor, she thought Big Joe's approach made him perfect for his job. The clients were at ease with him, and that seemed paramount. But now she saw the situation differently.

William, like many of the clients, was vulnerable. Other than his physical size, he was a person without power. Unable to fend for himself, he depended on others. Unable to communicate well, he had little voice. His behavior toward Stephanie had been frightening, but she didn't think it was malicious, at least not intentionally so. His actions needed to be curtailed, but Stephanie didn't believe William set out to hurt her. It was easy for her to regard William as a victim too—a victim of his own vulnerability.

Where had the impressionable William learned that it was acceptable to accost women and ignore their discomfort? That behavior was routinely modeled by Big Joe at the soup kitchen. William needed a helping of life skills as surely as he needed soup and a sandwich. But instead, he'd been taught to disrespect women and invade their boundaries. When he acted on that lesson, he'd been banned from the church community.

Stephanie suddenly saw the whole situation as tragic and unnecessary, the ripple effects of one man's actions. Big Joe had created an environment that served no one except himself. That he got away with this bad behavior in the name of Jesus was a further insult.

During the long, dark days of winter, Stephanie attended a week of continuing education. At that event, she told her colleagues about the soup kitchen. Their responses confirmed that Big Joe's behavior was out of line. Telling dirty jokes was not OK. Laughing at someone's discomfort was not OK. Kissing someone without consent was not OK.

Stephanie felt buttressed by the group and formulated a plan to confront Big Joe when she returned to work. But on her first day back, things had shifted. There'd been a break-in while she was away. This was a frequent problem during the cold weather. In response, the church secretary had requested that everyone use only the front door. She would buzz in employees and visitors and keep track of who was in the building.

Disregarding that request, Big Joe used his key to come in a back entrance, bringing along a number of homeless men. The secretary heard them pushing around furniture and asked Stephanie if she would speak to Big Joe.

Stephanie reminded Big Joe of the rules and the reasons they were important, including the safety of the staff. Before she could finish, Big Joe blew up: "I'm doing God's work!" He was red in the face. "You're getting in my way!" He threw his keys at Stephanie, and they hit her torso. He yelled, "I quit!" and walked out the door, summoning the men to follow.

Big Joe returned the next day, claiming he was "75 percent repentant." He wanted his job back. But the church leaders had already accepted his resignation. Throwing a heavy key ring at Stephanie could be considered assault, and the incident took place on church property, so they held their ground. Big Joe's anger escalated until

law enforcement got involved. The situation ended with a police order to keep Big Joe out of the building.

Still, he had his supporters. Big Joe's friends wrote letters to the church board critiquing Stephanie's ministry. Among other things, some alleged that her prayers did not reach God because she was a woman. The letters were not signed, which made them easier to ignore. Some even struck Stephanie as funny, with a childish understanding of who God is and how prayer reaches God. But underneath the absurdity of the language, Stephanie recognized that the barbs were calculated to hurt her, a female pastor, simply because of her gender and position.

Gender and position are precisely what made Stephanie a target. Her status as a clergywoman challenged the unspoken rules of sexism—that men are entitled to more power, control, respect, and authority than women. When sexism's central belief of the superiority of men is ignored, brutality can bristle. When it's questioned, anger can spark. When it's challenged, violence can be triggered. The progression isn't complicated.

The dynamics between Big Joe and the soup kitchen clients illustrate how sexist behaviors infiltrate and affect a system, and how outside responses can vary. The differences in how people responded to William and Big Joe show that more powerful men (Big Joe) are usually allowed to exhibit more sexist behavior than less powerful men (William). This is the problem of impunity—the more power a man has, the more leeway he has to commit infractions and go unpunished.

Because William had a lower status, his behaviors elicited prompt responses from law enforcement. His skin color was undoubtedly a factor as well. People rally quickly to protect a woman—especially a young, college-educated white woman such as Stephanie—from a man of low status, especially a man of color. A man with high status would be given much more latitude. Would a white man in a business suit have been evicted from the sanctuary that Sunday morning?

Big Joe was not exactly high status, but he was protected by his position as director of the soup kitchen. Holding a position in a church, whether paid or unpaid, clergy or lay, can grant access to the church's inner workings. Churches are not quick to revoke these privileges or expose misconduct. If not for the vigilance of the secretary—which prompted Stephanie's intervention—Big Joe would not have resigned. He might still be hoisting his ladle and chortling at dirty jokes.

When Big Joe, enraged, threw his keys at her chest—a gesture which was oddly fitting—Stephanie had prevailed. A ring of keys may be a handy, heavy missile, but they're also a symbol of authority. Keys open doors and grant access. They symbolize ownership. Perhaps Big Joe wanted the weight of his keys to inflict a wound, but instead he returned power to its rightful owner.

Stephanie was a single individual, yet she did not seek justice alone. She drew on the help and resources of a number of people. When she realized that William was following her, she consulted with the senior pastor and reported the situation to the police. When it became apparent that William needed to be asked to leave the church premises, Stephanie worked with the church leaders to implement that plan. When William violated that agreement and showed up in the sanctuary, she again turned to church leaders.

Reflecting on William's situation caused her to turn to colleagues for reinforcement and insight at the continuing education event. They were faithful partners to her. In turn, Stephanie was a faithful partner to the church secretary, who was concerned about the security of the church building and its people. When the secretary requested assistance with Big Joe, Stephanie used her voice. And when Big Joe threw his keys at Stephanie, she reported the situation to the church leaders so they could take appropriate action and terminate his position.

No single action was earth-shattering, but taken cumulatively, the actions created significant change within that church system. Each action was likely uncomfortable in the moment. It's challenging to raise your voice when you feel vulnerable. But that moment of vulnerability is precisely when it's important to raise your voice.

Stephanie's actions remind us that we do not raise our voices alone or for ourselves alone, even when we are pursuing our own cause of justice. Others will benefit. Imagine what a different place that soup kitchen became when someone other than Big Joe wielded the mighty ladle.

Stephanie used her voice even though she was uncomfortably aware of the privilege she enjoyed. Instead of feeling apologetic about that privilege, she exercised it. That can be a tricky dance. But unless we learn to speak up for ourselves first—using whatever means we have at hand—we are unlikely to speak up for others who have less voice. Through practice, we learn to push through the vulnerability we feel and find our voice, join the collective voice, and amplify the voices of others.

*This article is adapted from Ruth Everhart's new book, which interweaves scripture with a narrative about sexual abuse in the church, [The #MeToo Reckoning: Facing the Church's Complicity in Sexual Abuse and Misconduct](#), published by InterVarsity Press. Copyright © 2020 by Ruth H. Everhart. Used by permission. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Harasser in the kitchen."*