They Abandoned and Shunned Us: Institutional Betrayal Following Pastor Sexual Exploitation of Adults in Australian Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches

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Abstract

This article examines the institutional dynamics following sexual violence perpetrated by pastors against adult congregation members, focusing on the lived experiences of institutional betrayal, moral injury and post-abuse coercive control. Drawing on data from 33 adult victim-survivors of pastor sexual exploitation within Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian communities in Australia, this study explores how institutional responses frequently compound the trauma of sexual violence, eroding survivors' spiritual, emotional, social and moral foundations. Rather than focusing on survivor safety and care, churches often prioritised the protection of the pastor and the preservation of their institutional reputation. Survivors described being silenced, blamed, ostracised and spiritually manipulated through distorted theological teachings, resulting in moral injury characterised by violations of conscience, trust and meaning. Institutional and pastoral responses mirrored patterns of coercive control commonly identified in domestic violence contexts, including spiritual gaslighting, reputational harm and character attacks. This article argues that institutional betrayal constitutes a central harm in cases of clergy-perpetrated sexual violence and advocates for survivor-centred, trauma-informed responses, together with structural and legal reforms to recognise and address coercive control within religious institutional contexts.

Keywords: Adult clergy sexual abuse; coercive control; DARVO; institutional betrayal; institutional courage; moral injury; post-abuse tactics; pastor sexual exploitation; #churchtoo.

Introduction

Sexual violence perpetrated by pastors is often concealed beneath layers of theological authority, relational trust and institutional protection. While public discourse has increasingly acknowledged the sexual abuse of children within religious institutions in Australia (Doyle, 2017; Hunt et al., 2024; McPhillips, 2016), the abuse of adults – particularly women – is still frequently framed as a moral failing or mutual indiscretion. Such framing obscures the dynamics of coercive control, a patterned and chronic form of abuse that involves manipulation, isolation, gaslighting and domination, rather than physical force (Stark, 2007). In Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Australia, the term "pastor" is commonly used to describe individuals who occupy positions of spiritual authority and institutional power, often exercising significant influence over congregants' beliefs, behaviour and community standing. The term "clergy" refers more broadly to recognised religious leaders across Christian denominations; both terms are used interchangeably throughout this article. In religious contexts, the term "pastor sexual exploitation", as used in this article, refers to sexualised conduct or sexual contact perpetrated by a religious leader who uses

spiritual authority, trust or dependency to obtain sexual access, thereby negating the conditions required for free and meaningful consent (Fortune, 1999; Queensland Government, 2024).

This form of exploitation is embedded within broader dynamics of sexual coercion and undue influence. In pastor–congregant relationships, there is a clear power imbalance, with autonomy progressively stripped away through deliberate coercive tactics exercised via spiritual authority, religious duress, emotional dependency and institutional hierarchy (Benkert & Doyle, 2009; Simpson & Death, 2026). Clergy-perpetrated abuse in these contexts is rarely a singular event; rather, it unfolds relationally through systemic grooming, emotional entrapment and the misuse of spiritual power (Garland & Argueta, 2010). When abuse is disclosed, institutional responses frequently mirror patterns observed in domestic and family violence, including denial, minimisation, blame-shifting and character attacks (Harsey et al., 2017; Smith & Freyd, 2014). Survivors are often disbelieved, pathologised and spiritually coerced into silence – responses that constitute what Smith and Freyd (2014) define as institutional betrayal.

This article explores the alignment between institutional responses to pastor-perpetrated sexual violence and the psychological dynamics of coercive control (Stark, 2007) and DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender), a tactic used to deflect accountability and preserve power (Freyd, 1997). It argues that these institutional practices produce moral injury among victim-survivors, rupturing trust, identity, conscience, faith and meaning following betrayal by trusted spiritual authorities. Drawing on survivor data from an anonymous online survey, this study identifies how institutions and perpetrator pastors often deny wrongdoing, attack the victim's credibility and reframe the perpetrator as the real victim. When enacted at an institutional level, these patterns function as a form of systemic coercive control, reinforcing silence, protecting reputational power and entrenching survivor marginalisation. Rather than viewing institutional betrayal as a secondary harm, this article situates it as a form of gendered sexual and spiritual abuse with enduring psychological, moral and relational injuries. Analysing these dynamics through the lens of coercive control enhances our capacity to recognise and disrupt the systemic structures that enable clergy sexual exploitation, and to advocate for meaningful institutional accountability and reform.

Background

Evangelicalism is not a single, formally organised religion, but an umbrella term encompassing diverse Christian denominations, charismatic networks, influential preachers, branded ministries and interconnected institutions (Hardy, 2021). Pentecostal Christians typically self-identify as Evangelical, although many Evangelicals do not identify as Pentecostal. Across these traditions, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches often function as tightly bonded moral communities structured around hierarchical authority, spiritual obedience and familial belonging (Hardy, 2021; Winell, 2007). Within these communities, the church is commonly framed as a "family", a metaphor that fosters intimacy, loyalty and emotional dependence while simultaneously raising the cost of dissent and disclosure. Belonging is cultivated through intensive participation, shared language and relational immersion, creating a closed moral system in which loyalty to leaders is spiritualised (Oakley & Humphreys, 2019; Winell, 2007). While this familial framing can offer validation and belonging, it simultaneously creates relational cover by which pastors may exploit trust and access without arousing suspicion (Mullen, 2020). In this context, disclosure of harm is frequently experienced not as reporting misconduct, but as betraying one's spiritual family – a dynamic that significantly inhibits victim-survivors from naming abuse.

Messages surrounding female sexual purity further intensify this vulnerability. Purity culture positions women as responsible for maintaining moral boundaries, regulating male desire and preserving spiritual order, while simultaneously obscuring definitions of abuse and consent (Allison, 2021; Owens et al., 2020). When sexual exploitation occurs within this framework, responsibility is often shifted away from the abuse of pastoral power and onto women, who are framed as morally or sexually culpable, or onto narratives that pathologise the pastor through discourses of stress, burnout or weakness (Simpson & Death, 2026). Survivor disclosures are therefore met not with protection, but with scrutiny, blame and theological minimisation. Together, sacralised authority, familial belonging, patriarchal gender roles and purity-based moral regulation form a structural environment in which clergy-perpetrated sexual exploitation can occur and remain concealed (Garland & Argueta, 2010; Langberg, 2020).

Authority within Evangelical and Pentecostal communities is overwhelmingly gendered. Pastoral leadership remains predominantly male, supported by theological frameworks such as complementarianism, which assign men spiritual authority and women submission within both family and church life (Giles, 2020; Kim & Shaw, 2018). While these teachings do not explicitly endorse sexual violence, they normalise unequal power relations and elevate obedience as a spiritual virtue. When combined with the sacralisation of pastoral authority, where pastors are framed as God's representatives or spiritual shepherds, these dynamics create significant barriers to refusal, resistance and disclosure (Benkert & Doyle, 2009).

Institutional Betrayal

Religious institutions have long responded inadequately to disclosures of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse, often prioritising the protection of the organisation and its leaders over the well-being of survivors (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015). These failures are not confined to isolated cases, but reflect systemic patterns of institutional self-protection. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA) revealed that systemic safeguarding failures were deeply embedded across many faith-based organisations. In relation to the Australian Christian Churches (ACC), a Pentecostal movement within Australia, the RCIRCSA concluded that the existing grievance procedures for handling complaints against pastors for sexual misconduct "give priority to the protection of pastors over the safety of children" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015, p. 18). While the RCIRCSA focused primarily on child abuse, similar patterns of institutional self-protection and reputational management have been observed repeatedly in accounts of adult victim-survivors (de Weger, 2016; Kennedy, 2009; Moncrief-Stuart & Pooler, 2025; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022).

These patterns align with institutional betrayal, as previously defined by Smith and Freyd (2014), but take on distinct features within religious contexts where theological authority, spiritual dependency, moral obligation and tightly bonded community structures discourage disclosure and heighten survivor vulnerability (Benkert & Doyle, 2009; Oakley & Humphreys, 2019). When churches fail to name the abuse, protect survivors or hold perpetrators accountable, they enact a form of double betrayal; the initial harm from the clergy member is compounded by the institutional denial, silence and blame that follow (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Victim-survivor research consistently demonstrates that institutional responses to disclosure frequently compound harm and are often experienced as more damaging than the original abuse (Flynn, 2003, 2008; Kennedy, 2009; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022). Both Flynn's (2003) and Kennedy's (2009) qualitative studies document patterns of denial, victim-blaming and institutional self-protection in church responses to abuse, which intensifies survivors' trauma and undermined trust in leadership and faith communities. Consistent with these findings, Pooler and Barros-Lane (2022) report that nearly half of all survivors in their research experienced the church's post-disclosure response as more harmful than the initial abuse, with most receiving little to no meaningful support. These findings underscore a broader pattern in which institutional self-protection routinely supersedes survivor wellbeing and justice.

One contributor to this betrayal is the continued lack of standardised definitions and policy recognition of adult clergy sexual exploitation and abuse. In Australia, the ACC does not explicitly define sexual contact between a pastor and an adult congregant as exploitation or abuse. Instead, such behaviour is categorised as "improper conduct" (ACC, 2023), language that implies mutual wrongdoing and fails to acknowledge the inherent power imbalance. This framing reinforces what Allison (2021) describes as a "co-equal perpetration of sin", in which survivors are framed not as victims but as moral participants in an affair or as having committed adultery. Such narratives erase the grooming, manipulation and coercion that characterise clergy sexual exploitation, recasting abuse as mutual consent between supposed spiritual equals (Allison, 2021; Fortune, 1999; Kennedy, 2009). This linguistic ambiguity has material consequences. Without institutional frameworks that identify adult clergy sexual exploitation as a form of abuse, survivors may struggle to name their experience as exploitation, access appropriate support or pursue accountability. As Freyd (2018) argues, when institutions fail to name betrayal, it corrodes survivors' ability to trust themselves and others, reinforcing isolation, confusion and psychological distress.

Coercive Control and the Limits of Recognition in Faith Communities

In recent years, coercive control has gained significant recognition in Australia as a form of gendered violence. Stark (2007) conceptualises coercive control as a gendered system of domination that operates through cumulative, often non-physical, tactics designed to restrict autonomy, induce dependency and regulate everyday life. Rather than focusing on isolated instances of violence, this framework emphasises how patterned strategies – such as surveillance, isolation, psychological manipulation, and the exercise of authority – work together to entrap victims within unequal power relations (Stark, 2007). Although originally developed to explain dynamics within intimate partner relationships, scholars have increasingly recognised the applicability of coercive control as operating within collective and institutional contexts, including cultic and religious organisations, high-demand groups and human trafficking networks (Dayan, 2018; Doychak & Raghavan, 2020; Hassan, 2022; Hill, 2019; Lalich, 2004; Stark, 2007).

Reflecting growing policy and public awareness, coercive control has been criminalised in multiple Australian jurisdictions. Most notably, New South Wales enacted the *Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Act 2022* (NSW) which establishes coercive control in intimate partner relationships as a standalone criminal offence. Queensland and South Australia have since advanced similar legislative reforms, signalling an emerging national shift towards recognising coercive control as a serious and sustained form of non-physical violence. In Victoria, a 2025 parliamentary inquiry into the recruitment methods

and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups has further expanded public and policy attention to coercive control, reflecting increasing recognition that coercive and psychologically abusive power structures extend beyond intimate partner relationships into high-demand religious movements and other cult-like institutional contexts (Lalich, 2004). Together, these legislative developments align with broader policy and research trends influenced by domestic violence scholarship and survivor advocacy, including reports by Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), which emphasise the chronic, cumulative and non-physical harms of coercive abuse (ANROWS, 2021).

Despite this progress, coercive control remains largely unrecognised in non-domestic contexts, particularly within mainstream Christian faith-based institutions, where similar patterns of entrapment, fear and domination frequently occur. Clergy-perpetrated abuse often operates through spiritual authority, community loyalty, theological manipulation and institutional hierarchy, creating conditions in which victims feel unable to resist, disclose or leave (Kennedy, 2009; Langberg, 2020). In religious settings, coercive control is fundamentally about domination and subordination and is frequently normalised or concealed through spiritual obedience or submission to authority (Stark, 2007). Perpetrators exploit these dynamics through tactics tailored to the victim's specific vulnerabilities, including relational embeddedness in church communities, faith-based identity commitments and emotional and social dependency on religious networks (Simpson & Death, 2026). Crucially, as Stark (2007) notes, coercive control is embedded in broader cultural and structural systems, yet institutional responses frequently fail to recognise its subtlety and complexity, allowing sexual coercion to remain hidden in plain sight.

DARVO: A Framework for Understanding Post-Abuse Maintenance Tactics

The acronym DARVO, Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender, was coined by psychologist Jennifer Freyd (1997) to describe a common defensive strategy employed by perpetrators of abuse when confronted with accusations. This pattern encompasses three interconnected stages: first, the denial of the abusive behaviour; second, a personal attack on the victim's credibility, character or mental health; and finally, the reversal of roles, where the perpetrator presents themselves as the true victim and the accuser as the one causing harm (Freyd, 1997). Initially developed in the context of interpersonal sexual violence, the psychological function of DARVO is to discredit the victim, distort the narrative and evade accountability (Freyd, 1997). In doing so, it reinforces the abuser's power and often garners sympathy or solidarity from third parties, thereby isolating and re-traumatising the victim. Subsequent research by Freyd et al. (Harsey & Freyd, 2020; Smith & Freyd, 2014) has demonstrated that DARVO not only protects the perpetrator, but also contributes to secondary victimisation – particularly when institutions employ similar strategies in response to disclosures.

In these contexts, institutional actors (such as HR departments, schools, or churches) may deny the wrongdoing, attack the whistleblower's motives or credibility and assert that the institution or the accused is the real victim of slander, disloyalty or spiritual disruption (Harsey & Freyd, 2020; Smith & Freyd, 2014). This mirrors the psychological dynamics of abusive interpersonal relationships, reinforcing trauma through public and private invalidation. Empirical studies have found that DARVO responses are particularly harmful to victims, diminishing the likelihood of disclosure, heightening distress and intensifying feelings of betrayal (Harsey & Freyd, 2020; Harsey et al., 2017; Ingram, 2025). Furthermore, observers – including community members and congregants – are often influenced by DARVO tactics unless they receive explicit education about power dynamics and the disclosure process for abuse.

This positions DARVO not only as a mechanism of post-abuse tactics but also as a potent tool for narrative control, particularly in tightly knit communities with established hierarchies (Harsey & Freyd, 2020). Understanding DARVO is vital when examining sexual violence within hierarchical, religious institutions, where moral authority, spiritual language and institutional loyalty can be weaponised to obscure abuse and silence victims (Harsey & Freyd, 2020). As this article indicates, survivors of clergy-perpetrated sexual violence often share accounts of institutional responses that exhibit DARVO patterns – responses that not only invalidate their experiences but also retraumatise them, worsening the psychological and spiritual injuries they have already endured.

Institutional Betrayal as a Precursor to Moral Injury

Because perpetrators in clergy abuse cases hold sacred moral authority, adult clergy sexual exploitation frequently precipitates moral injury, involving ruptures in trust, moral identity, faith and existential meaning (Mescher, 2023; Pargament et al., 2008). This injury is intensified when institutional responses minimise abuse, discredit survivors or prioritise organisational reputation over justice (Flynn, 2008; Herman, 1992; Simpson, 2025; Smith & Freyd, 2014). Such institutional betrayal undermines survivors' moral frameworks, exacerbates shame and self-blame, and contributes to enduring spiritual and psychological harm,

positioning moral injury as a central impact of clergy-perpetrated abuse (Mescher, 2023; Pargament et al., 2008; Simpson, 2025).

Method

This research was part of a larger study that employed a mixed-methods survey design to explore survivors' experiences of clergy-perpetrated abuse (Simpson, 2024). Data were generated through an anonymous Qualtrics survey designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of participants' experiences. The survey was developed to investigate three broad areas: (1) the nature of pastoral abuse and grooming dynamics; (2) the immediate and longer-term effects on participants' well-being; and (3) institutional responses to disclosure, which form the focus of this article.

Procedure

Recruitment relied on purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016). Information about the study was circulated via social media and disseminated through professional and survivor networks. To be eligible, participants needed to identify as adults (18+) of any gender who, from the age of 18, had experienced sexual harassment, coercion, abuse or an "inappropriate intimate relationship" with a pastor or church leader in an Evangelical or Pentecostal Christian context. Terminology was intentionally inclusive, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words. Potential participants were given detailed information on the study's aims, eligibility requirements and ethical protections before providing electronic consent. Support service information was embedded throughout. To protect anonymity in the close-knit faith communities under study, no identifying information was collected. Hosting the survey online allowed for accessibility while minimising risk. Ethical approval was obtained from the Queensland University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee.

Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2021), with responses read and coded inductively, informed by scholarship on trauma, coercive control and clergy sexual abuse. Themes were developed and refined through an iterative process, then related back to the research questions within a trauma-informed feminist framework. Due to the potential for participant identification, pseudonyms were not assigned; instead, quotations are presented without identifiers to maintain confidentiality. As a result, the quoted excerpts do not constitute a continuous narrative from a single participant; rather, they are used analytically to illustrate thematic patterns across the broader dataset.

Epistemology and Reflexivity

This article adopts a trauma-informed feminist orientation, positioning clergy sexual exploitation not only as an individualised trauma but also as a product of entrenched patriarchal structures and theological systems that enable abuse, shape disclosure responses and perpetuate institutional harm (Collins, 2000). Although this analysis foregrounds gendered power relations, it does not preclude men or gender-diverse people from being victim-survivors of clergy sexual exploitation and abuse within religious institutions, which affects people of all genders. In this study, no participants in the survey sample self-identified as men. This constitutes a limitation of the dataset and does not indicate the absence of male victimisation. Rather, the findings suggest that, within Evangelical and Pentecostal church contexts, women may be disproportionately affected or more likely to disclose, particularly where gendered hierarchies and complementarian norms intensify vulnerability and silence.

A trauma-informed framework guided the research design to ensure participant safety, agency and dignity remained central throughout recruitment, data collection and analysis (Campbell et al., 2019; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). In parallel, a feminist lens directed attention to how gendered power relations within churches reproduce inequality, sustain clerical authority and facilitate institutional betrayal (Clough, 2022). Reflexivity was maintained through journalling, supervision and critical self-awareness, given the researcher's dual role as counsellor and survivor-scholar.

Results and Discussion

Thirty-three people completed the survey: 32 identified as women and one as gender fluid. At the time of the abuse, participants were between 18 and 45 years of age (average age 24). This section begins with participants' accounts of disclosing sexual exploitation by pastors, followed by an analysis of institutional responses to those disclosures. From these accounts, four overarching themes were identified: (1) institutional betrayal and organisational harm; (2) post-abuse maintenance tactics; (3)

harms of institutional betrayal; and (4) survivor-identified needs for institutional courage. Each theme is outlined below, weaving together participant testimony with the relevant literature to examine how church responses compounded harm, shaped survivors' experiences and influenced recovery.

Disclosure of Sexual Victimisation

This section outlines patterns of disclosure among adult victim-survivors of sexual exploitation by pastors, providing contextual insight into the institutional dynamics examined in the subsequent thematic analysis. As no survey items were mandatory, response rates varied by question; percentages, therefore, reflect the number of participants to each item rather than the full sample.

Patterns of Disclosure

Survey findings indicate varied disclosure trajectories. Among participants who answered this item, 19.23% (n = 5) disclosed the misconduct at the time of the experience, 46.15% (n = 12) disclosed after the sexual abuse had ended, 26.92% (n = 7) had never disclosed their experience and 7.69% (n = 2) preferred not to respond. Initial disclosures were most commonly made to friends (n = 14), followed by church leaders (n = 11) and other contacts (n = 11), including senior pastors, denominational authorities, mental health professionals, police and intimate partners. These patterns suggest that survivors frequently sought support through personal or informal networks before engaging institutional or legal avenues.

Sixteen participants (n = 16) reported that they or others disclosed the abuse to church governing bodies. Several motivations for reporting were identified. The most frequently cited motivation was the desire to protect others from harm, reported by 68.75% (n = 11) of those who disclosed to church authorities. This finding aligns with national Australian data indicating that 53% of individuals who report sexual violence do so to prevent further victimisation (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2023). Some participants reported disclosure as a means of seeking accountability or justice. Specifically, 37.50% (n = 6) described reporting to hold the pastor accountable, while 43.75% (n = 7) identified the pursuit of justice as a motivating factor. These findings are consistent with Kennedy's (2009) observation that survivors may report abuse both to seek justice and to restore reputational standing following sexual exploitation. Disclosure was also influenced by external encouragement. Nearly one-third of participants (31.25%, n = 5) reported being encouraged to disclose by friends, while one-quarter (25%, n = 4) cited encouragement from professionals.

Non-disclosure to Church Authorities

Eleven participants (n = 11) reported that they had never reported the abuse to church authorities. Of these, 63.64% (n = 7) had never disclosed their experience to anyone. Multiple barriers to disclosure were identified, with fear the most prevalent. Among those who did not disclose, 90.91% (n = 10) expressed fear of community backlash and 36.36% (n = 4) reported fear of the pastor. One participant explained, "I was afraid of bringing a bad report to leadership", noting that this fear was grounded in an Old Testament narrative she had been taught, in which a messenger was executed for delivering unwelcome news to a king. Others described fear of losing relationships, income or social standing, including financial dependence on church employment. One participant stated, "I didn't want to lose him or his family. I didn't want to feel the shame the church would put on me. I was also financially dependent on the job at the church. I didn't want to lose people's respect."

Shame, self-blame and anticipated stigma were also prominent, with all participants (100%) reporting feelings of shame or embarrassment and 81.82% (n = 9) believing the abuse was their own fault. A lack of clear reporting pathways further inhibited disclosure. Nearly three-quarters of participants (72.73%, n = 8) were uncertain about how or where to report their experience. Participants noted the absence of transparent institutional processes, with one stating, "We know what to do when children are harmed, but older teenagers or adults – there seems to be no help." Finally, some participants (36.36%, n = 4) believed their experience was not serious enough to warrant reporting. This finding is consistent with national data indicating that 33% of individuals who do not report sexual violence perceive the incident as insufficiently serious (ABS, 2023).

Summary of Key Themes

Institutional Betrayal and Organisational Harm

The trauma of clergy-perpetrated sexual exploitation and abuse was frequently compounded by institutional responses that reinforced perpetrator power and displaced accountability. Rather than functioning as sites of care, churches often responded through denial and minimisation, extending harm and leaving survivors betrayed not only by an individual pastor but by the institution itself. In failing to name abuse, safeguard victims or hold perpetrators accountable, churches exacerbated trauma through inaction and self-protective practices – an expression of institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Several

participants reported immediate consequences following disclosure that reflected institutional power and coercive control. One survivor described being fired from her job, after which senior pastors arranged alternative employment and relocated her overseas. This process effectively removed her from her community, forced her to rebuild her life from scratch and was accompanied by threats to expose her to her new community if she tried to contact the perpetrator.

Others also described warnings, restrictions or implicit threats that prioritised safeguarding the pastor's family or reputation rather than the survivor's well-being. One participant explained:

> I was told a warning would be put on my staff file because they can't be seen to be taking sides. I was encouraged to think about what this could do to the pastor's family if people found out, and that if I went to the police, then I may be fired.

Another survivor described institutional restrictions imposed following disclosure:

> The pastor was stood down from his leadership role but allowed to continue to attend the church, we were from different [church redacted] campuses. I was told that I had to stay away from the campus where his family attended to give them space.

In some cases, institutional processes themselves became mechanisms of silencing. One survivor described how an investigation into organisational culture preceded her disclosure; however, because it was conducted by the abusive pastor's wife's best friend, she felt unable to disclose, fearing the harm such disclosure would cause within that close relational network. Other participants similarly reported that disclosure would have required reporting to individuals embedded within familial or closely connected leadership networks, including fathers, fathers-in-law or other relatives of church leaders. These compromised procedures eroded trust and foreclosed safe avenues for disclosure, reflecting institutional betrayal through structurally unsafe processes. These accounts illustrate institutional coercive control, in which responsibility is displaced onto survivors and moral pressure is applied to protect the perpetrator's reputation and family. By invoking reputational harm, employment consequences and claims of institutional neutrality, churches redirected accountability and constrained disclosure (Stark, 2007). When enacted by institutions vested with moral and spiritual authority, these practices also produce moral injury, rupturing survivors' sense of trust, conscience and meaning following overwhelming betrayal (Mescher, 2023; Pargament et al., 2008).

Instead of referring allegations to independent authorities, churches frequently handled matters internally. One survivor reflected: "An elder was notified and he informed the senior pastor, who all decided to keep it between themselves and discipline the pastor themselves." Others similarly described how institutional handling minimised the abuse and prioritised reputational management. One survivor stated: "Everyone knew, and no one questioned it." Another shared:

> Eventually, as part of an agreement with me, there had to be an apology ready by the leadership at a church meeting. They announced the meeting with very short notice, so not many people were there, and it was not framed as sexual misconduct, so I'm not sure how many congregants actually knew/understood. He resigned with accolades and compassion for his burnout, and they sent a donation bag around for a collection so he and his family could have a holiday.

Across survivor accounts, similar institutional responses were repeatedly described: "I was not believed", "I was told to forgive the pastor", "They protected the pastor", "They moved the pastor to another church community", "I was blamed", "I was told it was consensual because we were adults". These narratives reframed sexual exploitation as consensual sin, obscuring the multiple power imbalances between pastor and congregant, entrenched not only in spiritual and reverential authority but also compounded by significant age differentials, with an average age gap of 15 years.

Forgiveness and loyalty were frequently weaponised, mirroring coercive control tactics that minimise harm, shift blame and isolate survivors (Stark, 2007). One survivor recounted:

> I was offered money to stay quiet, I was asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement, I was told to forgive the pastor. They protected the pastor, and the church allowed the pastor to still stay in their position.

Several participants also expressed concerns that external health and therapeutic professionals were embedded within the same institutional networks, raising fears of compromised confidentiality and surveillance. One survivor believed that her health records may have been "accessed" and disclosed to church leadership. Another survivor described how control was exerted even through ostensibly supportive measures:

> The church offered to pay for a few sessions with a counsellor, but they chose and I never felt comfortable with the person they chose, so I ended up stopping the sessions. I sought my own counselling after this.

These accounts highlight how institutional control may extend into the strategic recruitment of allies within therapeutic and medical spaces, undermining survivor autonomy and safety. When support services are selected, monitored or perceived as aligned with church authority, they may function less as sources of care and more as mechanisms of containment, surveillance and information control. Such arrangements further entrench coercive dynamics, deter disclosure and keep survivors entrapped within the faith community, fearful of the consequences of leaving.

It is critical to recognise the parallels with domestic violence. In intimate partner abuse contexts, perpetrators frequently gather allies, including family members, professionals and community figures, to provide character references, monitor survivors and reinforce narratives that discredit or silence them (Spearman et al., 2023; Stark, 2007). In these settings, women often remain silent due to financial dependence or fear of losing their children (ANROWS, 2021; Stark, 2007). Similarly, within faith communities, this research demonstrates that silencing occurred through spiritual and social coercion, including threats of exclusion, community rejection and divine punishment. These dynamics are intensified in Evangelical and Pentecostal contexts, where churches frequently function as emotionally fused family systems and leaders are positioned as parental or paternal authorities (Winell, 2007). Within such systems, disclosure is experienced as threatening family cohesion and collective identity. One survivor noted that she was made to believe disclosing the abuse would make her responsible for breaking up her pastor's marriage, impacting the whole church. This tactic mirrors intimate partner abuse dynamics in which survivors are urged to "keep the peace for the sake of the family", shifting responsibility for harmony onto victims rather than requiring perpetrators to cease their abusive behaviour (Kelly et al., 2022).

Churches often presented themselves as caring and protective, but in practice silenced victims and shielded offenders. As one participant described: "The misconduct was acknowledged, but nothing changed. I was expected to continue working as normal." Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that churches actively reproduced the dynamics of coercive control observed in abusive relationships. Much like abusive partners, religious institutions maintained power by shifting responsibility onto survivors, minimising harm and prioritising institutional reputation over victims' safety. By framing silence as a spiritual duty, churches weaponised religious obedience as a mechanism of organisational control, compelling survivors to comply, self-silence and protect perpetrators. In this way, coercive control was enacted not only interpersonally but at an institutional scale, extending abuse beyond the individual pastor and embedding it within organisational systems. Institutional betrayal thus functioned not merely as secondary harm but as a second violation, compounding trauma and obstructing recovery (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

Post-Abuse Maintenance Tactics

The harm of adult clergy-perpetrated sexual exploitation did not end with the violation itself. Survivors described post-abuse maintenance tactics as a continuation of abuse, enacted through deliberate institutional strategies used by pastors and church leaders to silence, discredit and control them following disclosure (Simpson & Death, 2026). These practices align with Freyd's (1997) DARVO framework and with post-separation abuse dynamics observed in domestic and family violence contexts (Stark & Hester, 2019).

Denial

Denial and minimisation were widespread. Nearly 60% of participants reported that their pastor outright denied the abuse, while 61% said it was reframed as consensual or romantic. Others recalled being urged to "forgive and move on" as a spiritual duty. One survivor explained that the pastor framed the sexual contact as a "weakness of the flesh" or a "moment of vulnerability". Such minimisation created a dual-rule system in which perpetrators excused their own conduct as human weakness, while holding others to rigid moral standards. As Langberg (2020) observes, this asymmetry enables the normalisation of abuse while simultaneously silencing those who name it.

Attack

Denial was often followed by personal attacks on the survivor's credibility. Some 44% of survivors were labelled "crazy" or accused of instability, while others were branded with misogynistic tropes such as the "Jezebel spirit", casting them as seductresses rather than victims. One survivor stated that she was told, "I was the one who caused it like a Jezebel in the bible." Within Christian discourse, the Jezebel trope functions as a misogynistic religious narrative that sexualises and discredits women, allowing abuse to be reframed as moral failure rather than coercive exploitation (Collins, 2000; Simpson & Death, 2026; Stark & van Deventer, 2009). In this study, its use operated as a DARVO tactic, shifting blame onto survivors and

protecting perpetrators from accountability (Harsey & Freyd, 2020). Another survivor described that she was told she was mentally unwell, in need of psychiatric treatment, and that "the conduct didn't meet the test of sexual harassment because it is open to interpretation (it was innuendo)". Such responses pathologise disclosure and shift attention away from the perpetrator's behaviour. Within many Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian faith communities, mental illness has long been stigmatised, with some churches prioritising "deliverance" rituals to expel demons rather than referring to clinical support (Mercer, 2013). Kennedy's (2009) research further illustrates how demonology and deliverance theology were used as grooming and control mechanisms in cases of adult clergy sexual exploitation. In her study, some women were told they possessed a "spirit of lust" or a "spirit of enticement", reframing abuse as evidence of spiritual corruption within the victim, rather than misconduct by the clergy member. These beliefs intensified fear and confusion, as questioning the pastor's actions was positioned as questioning God, faith or spiritual authority. Deliverance practices, including prayer, exorcism and bodily healing rituals, were sometimes presented as necessary interventions to expel these alleged spirits. In such contexts, clergy framed sexualised contact as part of spiritual healing, redemption or purification, exploiting theological concepts of sin, chastity and bodily contamination (Kennedy, 2009). Kennedy found that these practices were particularly effective in silencing women, as resistance risked being interpreted as spiritual rebellion or evidence of demonic influence.

These dynamics illustrate how fear-based spiritual frameworks can be weaponised to entrap survivors, collapse moral boundaries and legitimate abuse under the guise of religious care. When combined with institutional loyalty and patriarchal authority, such tactics function as forms of spiritual and institutional coercive control, aligning with broader patterns of grooming and post-abuse maintenance identified in this study (Simpson & Death, 2026). These tactics not only discredit and isolate survivors, but also echo broader patterns of gendered control in which women's credibility is undermined to preserve existing power structures (Taylor, 2022).

Reverse Victim and Offender

Almost half the participants reported that pastors positioned themselves as victims of spiritual warfare, marital struggles or personal weakness. Some pastors drew on scriptural analogies, such as comparing themselves to King David and victims to Bathsheba, a dynamic that dangerously distorts both consent and power. The David–Bathsheba narrative is rarely acknowledged in church contexts as a story of sexual violence; instead, it is more commonly minimised as mutual sin or adultery. Yet, as Tait (2014) argues, David used his authority as king to orchestrate Bathsheba's sexual violation, leaving her powerless. This perspective exposes how biblical texts can be weaponised to excuse abuse and how clergy may exploit these narratives to avoid accountability. In these cases, the adulterous framing did more than shift blame; it facilitated social rejection and undermined survivors' credibility. One participant described the consequences for her in her community: "They abandoned us and shunned us. They believed lies." Another survivor explained how this narrative was institutionalised following disclosure:

> The pastors told me I had had an affair and told the board I was involved in an affair. The pastor was then let go, but later two other women stepped forward. By that point, the damage was already done – around 800 people in the church believed I was an adulterous woman.

These accounts demonstrate how theological misrepresentation functioned as a post-abuse maintenance tactic, recasting sexual exploitation as moral failure and consolidating institutional power.

Spiritual Abuse

Spiritual abuse involves the misuse of spiritual authority, religious language or sacred belief systems to control, coerce or harm another person, resulting in psychological, emotional and spiritual injury (Oakley & Humphreys, 2019). Some survivors described their personal faith as a significant source of strength and meaning throughout their experience. In these accounts, harm did not stem from faith itself, but from the way religious teachings were weaponised by those in positions of power. Scripture and spiritual concepts were selectively distorted to justify control, silence disclosures and protect church leaders, rather than to promote care, truth or justice. In this way, spiritual authority functioned as a mechanism of coercive control, with implicit or explicit spiritual threats used to suppress resistance and reinforce fear. Over half of participants (52%) reported scripture being used against them, including warnings not to "bring shame upon the church" and messages such as "all have sinned". I describe this practice as "sin-levelling", which minimises abuse by framing sexual exploitation as morally equivalent to ordinary human failings, thereby obscuring power differences, undue influence and violations of fiduciary duty inherent in pastoral relationships, and deflecting accountability (Langberg, 2020; Oakley & Humphreys, 2019).

The findings suggest that spiritual abuse functions as a form of relational trauma, in which religious authority is used to instil fear, shame and control, disrupting survivors' relationships with God, self and the church. Survivors described internalising

blame and developing strong emotional and bodily reactions to spiritual language, practices or symbols. Over time, elements of faith that had once provided comfort, such as worship and prayer, became associated with threat, reflecting well-established trauma responses that affect thinking, emotions and the body (Herman, 1992; Pargament, 2011). These trauma responses were reinforced by institutional and theological pressures after disclosure. Survivors were often told that reporting would "destroy the church", while forgiveness was framed as a test of spiritual maturity or obedience.

One survivor recalled being pressured to forgive and remain in the church to "keep the pastor accountable", while another came to believe she herself required forgiveness rather than recognising the harm done to her. As a "good Christian", she was told, forgiveness should come easily. Such distortions of forgiveness enabled perpetrators to bypass accountability while transferring the emotional, relational and spiritual burden of reconciliation onto those who had been harmed (Kim & Shaw, 2018). Rather than supporting survivor recovery, forgiveness was weaponised and imposed as a moral obligation, operating as a post-abuse maintenance tactic that preserved clerical authority and institutional reputation.

Intimidation and Threats

Several survivors described direct intimidation. Seventy-two per cent reported feeling unsafe after the abuse, and more than half said the pastor continued to pursue them after disclosure. One participant noted:

> My children and I were stalked for about three months. The church administration encouraged congregates [sic] who had expressed concerns to show them evidence. This resulted in people sitting outside my private residence taking photos of the children and me and following us. It was very traumatic.

Another participant recalled that the pastor "threatened to draw blood from me, threatened to beat my husband if in the same room", while another explained that "he became enraged at me because I did or didn't do something that upset him and said he felt like hitting me". Intimidation also took the form of emotional blackmail. One-third of participants reported that the pastor threatened suicide if they disclosed the abuse, while others were warned that speaking out would result in reputational ruin, loss of employment or harm to their families. These tactics mirror post-separation abuse in domestic violence, where perpetrators use emotional blackmail, threats of suicide, reputational threats and community manipulation to maintain control (Stark & Hester, 2019).

Harms of Institutional Betrayal and Coercive Control

Within churches, survivors experienced ongoing domination that privileged clerical authority over congregant safety. Survivors described feeling spiritually entrapped and socially isolated, with their autonomy, identity and sense of moral coherence progressively eroded. One participant reported that the pastor "threatened that we will still be together in the end", prompting her to seek an apprehended violence order (AVO) to protect herself and her children. The psychological toll of this entrapment was substantial. In my prior analysis, adult clergy sexual exploitation was shown to result in significant spiritual, psychological, emotional, financial and relational injuries (Simpson, 2025; Simpson & Death, 2026). These findings revealed that nearly three-quarters of participants reported anxiety (72%), over half reported PTSD (52%) and almost half disclosed depression (48%) or suicidal ideation (48%), with some engaging in self-harm as a means of coping. These harms align with established findings on the psychological impacts of prolonged domination, threat and fear (Clements & Sawhney, 2000).

Beyond these cumulative injuries, survivors also experienced moral injury, which emerged when harm occurred within institutions claiming moral and spiritual authority. Moral injury arose from profound violations of trust, conscience and meaning, particularly when disclosures were silenced, perpetrators were protected and abuse was reframed as spiritual failure, sin or burnout (Mescher, 2023; Pargament et al., 2008). Such injury was further evident in the disruption of survivors' moral and spiritual meaning-making systems following abuse and institutional responses. Survivors described withdrawing from previously sustaining spiritual practices, not as a rejection of belief but as a protective response to environments now associated with threat, coercion and moral violation (Simpson, 2025). For some survivors, religious symbols, worship music and communal religious practices became additional sites of trauma, evoking distress, hypervigilance and exhaustion due to their association with prior abuse, silencing and institutional betrayal (Pargament et al., 2008).

This heightened vigilance reflected an ongoing need to monitor for danger within institutional religious contexts. Such experiences generated moral dissonance, particularly when institutional responses reframed abuse through narratives of sin, forgiveness, or relational failure. Survivors were thereby forced to reconcile harm with systems claiming moral authority, resulting in an erosion of trust in both institutional leadership and the moral frameworks that had previously structured their sense of self, purpose and relational safety. These dynamics reflect core features of moral injury, including betrayal by trusted authorities and enduring disturbances in meaning, conscience and identity (Mescher, 2023). In these contexts, institutional

responses intensified harm by compounding fear, self-blame and moral disorientation. Coercive control thereby operated not only at the interpersonal level but also at the organisational level.

These patterns align with broader findings on institutional betrayal, underscoring how organisational self-protection systematically amplifies trauma and obstructs recovery (Smith & Freyd, 2014). What emerges clearly from the data is a pattern of systemic complicity: pastors exploiting theology, churches protecting reputations and survivors left carrying silence, stigma and secondary trauma, consistent with previous research (de Weger, 2016; Flynn, 2003, 2008; Kennedy, 2009; Pooler & Droesch, 2025). These responses mirror self-preserving institutional dynamics that prioritise reputation over survivor safety. Survivors' accounts of entrapment, secrecy and forced reconciliation reflect wider patterns associated with patriarchal systems that normalise male authority and demand female submission (Montesanti, 2015; Ross, 2019).

Survivor-Identified Needs for Institutional Courage

When asked what they needed to disclose sexual exploitation by pastors and what was required after disclosure, survivors consistently emphasised the need for safety, neutrality and trauma-informed care – conditions that were systematically denied within their churches. Survivors also identified truth-telling and accountability as foundational. One participant summarised this sequence as "Believe them. Get the truth. Follow the process of truth–justice–repentance–mercy", signalling that moral repair could not occur without first naming harm and holding perpetrators accountable. Survivors further emphasised the need for clear guidelines, anonymous reporting options and support from qualified professionals external to church structures, which they identified as essential conditions for safety and trust. One survivor wrote: "Have clearly published guidelines for reporting. Have serious complaints or any complaints against pastors handled by TRULY independent counsel/organisations who are experienced and knowledgeable in this." Others echoed the need for structurally independent and professionally led accountability mechanisms that sit outside church leadership. One participant stated:

> Make it mandatory to have a confidential service to specifically deal with this kind of thing. Have an accountability structure
> in place (that sits above church leadership) run by qualified professionals, not just church volunteers or paid church workers
> with no qualifications in counselling or psychology. Anything that means there is a safe place to go.

Many survivors also emphasised the importance of anonymity, calling for "anonymous reporting" and protection of the reporter's identity. Others highlighted deep mistrust of male-only leadership structures, noting that all-male elderships discouraged disclosure. As one survivor explained:

> The governing bodies are full of men who are abusing their power. I don't think I would ever tell a governing body. I think
> only an external organisation with no church affiliation would be the only way someone may feel confidence in reporting.

Beyond structural reform, victim-survivors identified the emotional and relational support required following disclosure. Participants emphasised belief, advocacy and trauma-informed care. One survivor suggested: "Assign them a support mentor (qualified counsellor/psych) to be alongside as they journey through their process." Others echoed this: "Listen, believe, and refer to professional support", and "Believe the survivor, be trauma-informed, do not DARVO the survivor/complainant." These calls align with Freyd's (2018) concept of institutional courage, the moral commitment of institutions to prioritise the well-being of those who have been harmed over the protection of reputation. For victim-survivors, their disclosures reveal that institutional courage means having transparent, accountable and trauma-informed reporting pathways that centre their safety, agency and right to be heard without fear.

Across these themes, survivors clearly expressed that institutional responses often worsened rather than eased the trauma of adult clergy sexual exploitation. At the same time, survivors were able to describe what they need from institutions, emphasising safety and independent, trauma-informed processes. These findings align with earlier research that documents similar institutional failures (de Weger, 2016; Flynn, 2008; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022), while also extending the work by foregrounding survivors' own descriptions of what institutional courage should look like in practice. The accounts shared here highlight a serious and troubling gap between institutional practice and survivor experience and expectations.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the small sample sise limits the generalisability of the findings beyond the specific cohort of adult survivors represented in this study. Second, although the survey generated rich qualitative data, the absence of in-depth qualitative interviews constrained the depth with which individual experiences of institutional betrayal, coercive control and recovery trajectories could be explored. Third, the study captures survivors' experiences at a single point in time,

limiting insight into the longer-term evolution of institutional behaviour, coercive control and recovery processes. Future research incorporating interview-based and longitudinal methods could address these limitations.

Conclusion

This article indicates that institutional responses to clergy-perpetrated sexual exploitation and abuse in evangelical and Pentecostal Christian churches across Australia frequently function as forms of coercive control, inflicting ongoing harm long after the initial violation. Rather than providing refuge, accountability or protection, church institutions routinely reproduced the dynamics of abuse through silencing, victim blaming, reputational management and the protection of perpetrators. These responses operated through recognisable coercive mechanisms, including DARVO strategies, spiritual abuse such as the misuse of forgiveness theology, intimidation and threats of social, relational and spiritual exclusion. Importantly, these practices were not isolated failures of leadership or pastoral care, but systemic responses embedded within patriarchal religious structures. Institutional loyalty was repeatedly framed as moral righteousness, while survivor disclosure was cast as rebellion, sin or spiritual failure. In this way, institutional power was exercised to discipline, contain and control survivors. By centring survivor testimony, this study establishes institutional betrayal not as a secondary or incidental harm, but as a primary mechanism of post-abuse control that compounds trauma, erodes trust and obstructs recovery. The clear parallels between these institutional dynamics and coercive control in domestic violence contexts demand a fundamental reframing of how adult clergy sexual exploitation is understood and addressed. This includes recognising clergy sexual abuse of adults as inherently exploitative, naming institutional betrayal as a form of coercive control and adopting trauma-informed, survivor-centred and accountability-driven frameworks for institutional response, justice and care.

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