

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren and distinguished members of this committee:

I am Rev. Ashley Easter from North Carolina and I am here to support LD 913.

Not only am I an ordained reverend, but I am also a survivor of abuse at the hands of clergy.

I was born into a Christian church where my grandfather was a pastor. And, one of my first memories was that of abuse at the age of 4 when my grandfather-pastor decided to take it upon himself to turn me into a "submissive girl".

And while I will spare this committee the details, my grandfather/pastor locked me in a basement bedroom alone with him for hours until he broke my spirit and forced submission upon me. Not only did his actions drastically affect my life as a child, the abuse I experienced at his hands negatively impacts my life to this day.

It wasn't just that he was my grandfather, he was a pastor... a "Man of God"... someone whom I and others relied upon for spiritual guidance and trusted with our very souls.

The actions of Clergy are perceived and often directly taught to be in accordance with God's Will and Command... no matter how devastating their actions may be.

Clergy are often regarded as Messengers of God, and it is this unmatched position of power that allows them to so easily take advantage of children and coerce vulnerable adults.

Phil Saviano (a survivor abused by a priest) said it best:

"How do you say 'no' to God?"

Indeed, how *do* you say 'no' to God? And how do you say 'no' to a pastor who is said to be a spokesperson for God? My childhood self and my vulnerable adult self surely didn't know. And it took me decades to come to the realization that God had not told this clergyman to abuse me.

Now, as an ordained reverend myself, I believe that it is my sacred duty and the duty of all clergy to protect the vulnerable, to use our titles and privileges to bless and not harm or abuse the trust of those in our care.

I believe all clergy should be held to the highest moral standards... and that any who would dare to abuse the office the clergy to harm a vulnerable person should also be held legally responsible for their destructive actions.

You are probably familiar with the words of Jesus when he said of those who harm vulnerable people: *if anyone offends one of these little ones it would be better for them [that dangerous person] to have a millstone tied around their neck and for them to be cast into the sea.*