

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

I am Jules Woodson from Colorado Springs, Colorado and I am here to support LD 913 : An Act To Protect the Public from Clergy Sexual Abuse.

In Texas, at a church event when I was 14 years old, I first met the man who would soon become my youth pastor. At 15, my family and I attended his ordination ceremony shortly after he was hired by my church. Over the next several years, as an active member of the youth group, I was groomed in many ways and when I was 17 years old, Andy Savage, my youth pastor, sexually assaulted me while driving me home alone from church. Though I reported the assault the very next day to the senior pastors of my church, I was immediately blamed and silenced while my abuser was supported and protected. Law enforcement was never notified and the abuse was effectively covered up.

Subsequently, the trauma caused not only from the physical/sexual assault but the emotional and spiritual abuse I suffered as a result of the cover up has had a significant negative impact on my life, to include a week long hospitalization and extensive therapy which continues to this day. I trusted my pastors and depended on them to protect me but instead they stole everything from me.

Nearly 20 years after my assault, in January of 2018, I finally found the courage to make a police report and to tell my story publicly. Within days my story made international news as my former youth pastor, who was working now as a pastor at a mega church in Tennessee, admitted to abusing me and received a standing ovation from his congregation. It was dubbed the standing ovation heard around the world...How could a pastor admit to sexually assaulting a minor in his care and be applauded?!?!

Unfortunately, this is the reality we live in. When sexual abuse occurs in the religious world, cheap grace and forgiveness is leveled as an excuse to protect and defend clergy who abuse their position of trust and authority to prey on the vulnerable, with zero regard for accountability.

My abuser later went on to say he believed the encounter to be consensual even though Texas law states that it could not be consensual as it clearly exploited my emotional dependency on him as my pastor, regardless of my age. This new bill before your committee incorporates the Texas law language that my abuser, Pastor Andy Savage, could have been tried under had church leadership reported him to police.

Last year, after speaking with the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office in conjunction with the Montgomery County District Attorney's office it was determined that the statute of limitations

had unfortunately passed and no charges would be able to be filed. In their public statement regarding my case they said specifically, "As a result, we are unable to investigate and seek justice to the full extent of what we normally would in such a case."

What I believe to be even more heartbreaking is the simple fact that my story is not unique. I am just one of many who have been victimized by a member of clergy. Though I now stand before you with confidence and new found strength, as a survivor, speaker and advocate who has found her voice and made a global impact, there are countless victims of clergy sexual abuse who remain in the shadows.

Its unfathomable to me that there are laws that protect students from predatory teachers, and patients from predatory doctors, counselors, psychologists and social workers yet, those who are sexually abused by a spiritual leader are left to fend for themselves. I come before you today in an effort to help clergy sexual abuse victims in the great state of Maine to have a voice. I am here today to stand in solidarity with them...And I humbly ask that you stand with us too. Please vote in support of LD 913 to protect the public from clergy sexual abuse.

Thank you for your time.