

## HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHURCH IS SPIRITUALLY ABUSIVE?

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [Flyingfreenow.com](http://Flyingfreenow.com), and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.*

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 5 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me Jimmy Hinton of jimmyhinton.org, and we're going to be talking about church abuse and spiritual abuse. Jimmy has a unique perspective because he is a pastor. For me, I have had so many bad experiences with pastors that it's always really refreshing to me to meet a pastor I can talk to and trust. I hope you have the same experience as you're listening to Jimmy today. I'm going to let him introduce himself. First of all Jimmy, I want to thank you for being with us.

JIMMY: Thank you, good to be here. Thank you for having me.

NATALIE: Can you tell us a little bit about what you do, and a little bit about your journey and how you came to do it?

JIMMY: Okay, so first of all, I don't know how much you trust this pastor, because I wear sandals all year round. It's 15 degrees outside right now, it's snowing, and I've got my sandals displayed in full glory, so I love the cold. A lot of people tell me they can't trust me because I like the cold. But that's my one vice.

NATALIE: Where do you live again? Where's your location?

JIMMY: We're in southwestern Pennsylvania about 60 miles east of Pittsburgh

NATALIE: Okay, well, I'm up in Minnesota right now, we're talking single digits here. You'd love it here.

JIMMY: Yeah I would. A little bit about myself and how I'm here: I started full-time preaching in 2009 in my home congregation, just a little small church in rural Pennsylvania. Two years later in 2011, a young adult disclosed to me she had been sexually abused by my dad when she was a small child and my dad was the former minister. He was actually my preacher growing up, at the church that I'm preaching at now. Obviously it devastated me, it confused me, it made me angry, it humiliated me. Just a flood of emotions hit me all at once. This was about an hour before I had to do a wedding rehearsal for one of my church members. I was not in a very good frame of

mind for doing that. And to make a long story short, I'd spoken with my mom, and we both only saw one option before us, and that option was to report this to the police. This was before all the Jerry Sandusky stuff at Penn State. In fact, that was just starting to get kicked up about the time that we reported my dad. I was not aware of Pennsylvania's mandated reporting laws, and I tell people that I was an uninformed pastor who didn't even know that I was a mandated reporter. So I wasn't reporting because I had to, I was reporting because it was the right thing to do. That was the only option my mom and I saw before us. It was disclosed to me on a Friday, and on a Monday my mom and I were turning in my childhood hero to my local police. We had no idea how many victims would be uncovered in the investigation.

Once he was called in, he confessed to twenty-three victims, though we think he has hundreds of victims. Some of those victims were young children at my congregation at the time of his arrest, at the time of discovery. So my wife and I were not only trying to figure out how to navigate this, as his son and daughter-in-law, but also as the pastor of a church where the abuser happened to be my father. So my wife and I had to make the very difficult decision to... (this was a personal decision) but we drove to the house of the family that had the young victims in our church, and we went there as their pastor and as their pastor's family, and we broke the news to them because we decided that if that was our child, we'd want to hear it from our pastor before the police knocked on our door to tell us that our kids had been molested. I tell people that I drove a truck for years, and I have over a million miles under my belt, and the longest mile or two miles that I drove was from our house to that family's house to tell them my dad had raped every one of their young daughters.

So that began a journey where my dad got arrested pretty immediately. Within a few weeks of reporting he was arrested. He was sentenced a year later, actually four days before Father's Day. It was the same week of the Sandusky trial, in June of 2012. So that ended up being a good thing, because our story got buried very deep in the newspaper, because Jerry Sandusky was on the front page of every newspaper. He is now serving a 30 - 60 year sentence in prison. He'll be 91 or 92 years old when he's first eligible for parole. So my dad will die in prison. There's so much to wade through, to try to figure out.

So I've kind of dedicated my life to understanding abusers and deception specifically, deception techniques. And studying us. What is it about us that makes us blind to abuse? I do a lot of preventative trainings, and I've partnered with two neuroscientists, Dr. Stephen Macknik and his wife Dr. Susana Martinez-Conde. They're professors in New York City, and they study deception and how that affects the human brain and the pathways. Very specifically deception techniques. Their research has nothing to do with

abuse, and I applied their research to the field of pedophilia, because I saw the things I'd read in their book just matched almost identically to the things that my dad had done whenever he would deceive all of us. So that got the attention of Drs. Macknik and Martinez-Conde and we formed a partnership and we now collaborate and do research together.

NATALIE: That is fascinating.

JIMMY: Yeah, pretty cool stuff.

NATALIE: And so needed. Whatever you guys uncover and the connections that you make, that is information that could potentially rock the Christian world.

JIMMY: I think revolutionary, and if you go on my website jimmyhinton.org and go under the videos, there's a video where the three of us co-present. They came to Somerset and it was specifically for us to collaborate, but they asked me if it would benefit our community if they gave a talk on the science of deception. I spoke to our chief of police and he was fantastic, and he clicked his fingers and made it happen. We had police there, we had people from all the advocacy organizations in a three-county area. The videos are on our website, it is powerful, powerful stuff.

NATALIE: I want to put a link to those in this podcast. How many are there?

JIMMY: There are two of them, part one and part two.

NATALIE: What is the name I should look for?

JIMMY: "Champions of Illusion", which is actually the name of their most recent book. I asked them if I could use the name and they gave the ok.

NATALIE: I can't wait to check that out for myself.

JIMMY: Yeah, it's really, really good.

NATALIE: Well, one of the reasons I wanted to specifically talk with you in this podcast episode is because so many of my readers and listeners, women I talk to on a regular basis... most of them are women of faith who have lived, many of them, two and three decades in emotionally abusive marriages. A handful of them have also experienced physical abuse, but most of the women I work with, it's emotional and spiritual abuse. They come out of very conservative religious backgrounds. They've been taught the

whole idea of male headship and patriarchy... I call it soft patriarchy, which is complementarianism. So that has been their background, and it's also been mine, in which they believe that women, our job or our role, is different from men's. And it actually sets them up (if you're in a great marriage that can work), but it sets up those who are in abusive marriages. It's like the perfect storm. It sets them up for the repeated cycle of trying to get help but being told that they don't deserve help or are not worthy of help because they are women and that part of their job is to "Keep your mouth shut and do what your husband says and cater to his whims and wishes." So what happens is that women reach out to their church. What's happened is that churches end up actually (just to make the long story of their journey short)... the women actually end up being the ones that are accused and blamed. And their husband ends up being nurtured and coddled and even given counseling. And oftentimes if the woman does eventually decide "I'm going to end the marriage because it's already been destroyed by broken vows, so I'm going to make it legal to protect myself," the church will often excommunicate her, and the husband will end up having a safe place.

Now that was my experience, but I am not alone. I'm like a typical case. And it's not just the only kinds of abuse that I've seen happen in churches. In my youth group growing up, the youth pastor sexually abused a couple of the girls that I went to youth group with. I was groomed myself in my early 20s by a very charismatic pastor. His wife sat down with me when I got engaged and said "Gee, I thought God was getting you ready to be my husband's next wife," because she was very sickly. There was talk about "Is she going to die?" Just crazy, crazy stuff. So this is typical. Recently I heard a statistic that clergy or pastors are actually one of the jobs that abusive people look to get into because it's easy to hide in that kind of a job because people are very trusting of a pastor. So, what do you have to say about that as a pastor and as someone who works with people? How do you respond to women when they say "These are all the things that have happened to me, and I love Jesus, but I'm scared of the church. I'm scared of pastors, I'm scared of elders."

JIMMY: I think first of all, we need to acknowledge it. We need to realize that it is a problem, that there are tremendous amounts of people, huge volumes of people being abused in our churches. Abuse doesn't happen "out there." It happens both "out there" and within the church. It's interesting: in Ephesians 6 when Paul is talking about spiritual warfare, he drops a line in there that's almost like Paul just assumes that the audience knows. It's not like he's given this profound idea and he elaborates on it. He just assumes that the Christians know that. And the term is this: "In the Heavenly places." He's talking about the spiritual forces and the powers and all this spiritual

warfare and he says “in the Heavenly places.” It’s around us, it’s among us, so we shouldn’t be surprised that it’s in the church. And yet, I see it over and over, and I was first introduced to this phenomenon pretty early on when my dad got arrested.

I started speaking out about it immediately. And I didn’t have a clue what I was doing, I didn’t know the first thing about deception and abuse, I just knew that my dad was an abuser and he had fooled us all. So I was out speaking out against abuse, and people and religious leaders would come up to me and say “That’s really horrible what happened to your family and we’re so sorry to hear all this. But we’re just curious: how’s your dad doing?”

NATALIE: Wow.

JIMMY: It wasn’t just once or twice or even ten times, it was over and over and over.

NATALIE: Unreal.

JIMMY: It was like this burning question on the minds of religious leaders and it was my first introduction to this: that the victims aren’t even on their radar. So I eventually got to the point where I’d come back and people learned to stop asking me that question because my response would be “Well, he’s doing fine. He’s got three meals a day, he’s got health insurance that most of us can’t get. He’s well taken care of. It’s his victims who aren’t doing well.” And they would just be like “Oh,” and awkwardly walk away, which I took a little pleasure in, I’m going to be a little bit honest. But I think at the heart of the issue is it’s not just patriarchy, because that does exist, but it existed in Jesus’ day. He lived in a very andro-centric, male-centered Jewish community. That in itself isn’t necessarily abusive. I have to be careful here because I don’t want to say that that’s abuse in itself. Because it’s not. But I do see that it does lend itself to abuse, and I do see that Jesus dealt with abusive men all throughout His ministry, so the question becomes “What was Jesus’ response to the women who are abused by these institutions, by the Jewish community, whether they were Pharisees, or Sadducees, or Essenes?”

Jesus’ response to those who were abused (spiritually abused, sexually abused, physically abused) was always to set them free. To come in, to intervene, to speak up on their behalf, and to send them away in peace. And His mission laid out in Luke chapter 4 when Jesus stood up in the synagogue and He read from Isaiah... in Luke chapter 4 He lays out His mission, and it’s to set the captives free, to proclaim liberty to the oppressed, to heal the blind, and I think He’s talking about the spiritually blind, too. And Jesus says “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your presence.” And of course

they're all applauding them, because they think He's talking about them. And then He stands up and He talks about how a prophet is not welcome in his own town. And He talks about Elijah and Elisha, and there's all these poor people and all these widows, yet how only one was healed, and that one not inside their own land. What Jesus was saying in that passage was that there was all this host of poor people and widows and perhaps oppressed people in the land of Israel, and none of the leaders stood up and did anything about it. And they became outraged. They went from applauding Him and drooling over Jesus reading from Isaiah talking about setting at liberty those who are oppressed, and they were all applauding Him until Jesus calls them out and says "You guys are those religious leaders. We still have orphans, we still have widows, we still have oppressed people, we still have abused people, and you're not doing anything about it." And so that's why Jesus was so scandalous to the religious leaders. He wasn't coming to change the patriarchal system per se: He was coming to address abuse in all of its forms, including the patriarchal system, but Jesus didn't tolerate abuse of any kind.

NATALIE: And He wasn't afraid to call it out.

JIMMY: No.

NATALIE: Let me just catch the listeners up to speed here on one thing and then I want to go back to it. Jimmy just recorded a workshop for the Flying Free Membership Group and in that workshop he talked about some of the things we talk about here. But one of the things he brought out was the "Do not forsake the assembly." Actually, let's just go right there. In this workshop that you did, you mentioned a verse that is often used to guilt people into making sure that they go to church. And by the way, we talked about how we are both big proponents of church. Obviously you're a pastor so you're a big proponent of church, and I am too. But the verse that you said that was often quoted is the one that says "Do not forsake the assembly..."

JIMMY: "...as some are in the habit of doing." So both of these Scriptures that I'm going to talk about come from Hebrews. But the "forsaking of the assembly" in the original language.. you lose so much in translation. In any language, from one language to another, you lose a lot in translation. Because it becomes impossible to translate the sense of and the color and the dimension of what we get from our native language. So in that passage it says "Do not forsake the assembly." The word that's used actually means "Do not ignore those who have been hurt and oppressed." That's the literal sense of that word. We've taken a literal translation of that and applied it to the American church model, and say that "forsaking the assembly" means not going to church when the church meets on Sunday mornings. The heart of that passage is "don't

be the priest who walks on the opposite side of the road from the man who is bleeding," the parable of the Good Samaritan.

NATALIE: Right.

JIMMY: That's the sense of that passage. Then the other one that's misused... you know, just to clarify, "don't ignore people who are hurt." That's what it means to not forsake the assembly. The other one that is widely misused is Hebrews 13:17. That's widely translated as "Submit to your leaders." My translation of that, my literal translation from Greek to English is this: "Be persuaded by those who go before you." That word "those who go before you" is translated in the English translation as "leaders." So, "submit to your leaders, get in line with them." That's how it's used, but that's not what it means. So "be persuaded by those who go before you and yield". So the word that we translate "submit"... that's an unfortunate translation. In a lot of places the word "submit" is an unfortunate translation because the literal meaning of that, the sense of that word is to yield, to yield to.

So I give an analogy of me driving a truck. I didn't use my 80,000 lb, 70 foot-long truck as a weapon and say "Well, I'm bigger than everybody else so because I'm a truck driver, you need to submit to me." When I merged onto highways, I yielded to traffic and traffic yielded to me. There is this triangle sign that says when you're merging with traffic you need to yield to them. Well, why? For safety, for the safety of everyone. Yielding is a protective step and when you yield, you certainly don't turn into bumper cars with people and tell them they need to submit to you because you're a leader. The yielding is a merging and a going along with. You merge into traffic with people on the highway and that's what yielding is. That's the sense of this word. Okay, so "be persuaded by those who go before you and yield, for they watch over your souls as ones about to give account, that they may do it with joy and not groaning, for this is not beneficial to you." So it's not "submit to the leaders" because Hebrews 13:17 says that you need to submit to them because they're leaders. That's not at all what that passage means, not even close to what that passage means. So I think those are things that are really important. I often say that bad theology leads to bad practices. We've got a whole lot of bad theology.

NATALIE: Yeah.

JIMMY: It elevates church leaders when it shouldn't. And ironically, it's the abused, the very people that Jesus came to free and to defend... when the abused cry out about their abuse, that's when church leaders are most abusive toward the abused, and most protective of the abusers. And it makes no sense. Biblically it doesn't make sense. If

you're an atheist, it doesn't make sense. It does not make sense to protect the person that's causing harm intentionally, willfully, and habitually on innocent and vulnerable people.

NATALIE: Yes. Well, and I think that's how you can tell an overall general idea of the culture of a church by how they respond to people who are disenfranchised and hurting.

JIMMY: Yes.

NATALIE: And you know, it's popular to respond by putting together some volunteers to go to the local soup kitchen and serve soup. But what are you doing with the people that are actually in your congregation? What are you doing with the messy situations where you have sexual abuse or physical abuse or emotional abuse? What are you doing with those people? Because that's messy. And a lot of times leaders... they want the marriages in their church to be successful. Because they're out there teaching Sunday School classes and trying to get people to have good healthy marriages, and if they've got marriages in their church that are failing, I don't know if they think it reflects on them and their teaching.

JIMMY: Yeah, I do. As a church leader I try to understand...I turned my own dad in. Not because he was a horrible dad growing up and I was just ready to put him away. No, it was quite the opposite. We had no idea that my dad was an abuser. He was my absolute best friend. Hands down, we were very close. I had no reason whatsoever to ever suspect that he was sexually abusing children. When this young woman came to me, that was the only allegation that had ever been brought to any of us about him. I had one allegation by one victim.

NATALIE: Yup.

JIMMY: So I started going back and saying "What is it about church leaders that makes them not want to reach out to hurting people?" Because I could not look across my office desk and couldn't look across the desk at her and see her in her broken condition and not stand up and protect her with my life. I didn't know if I was going to be fired. I went home and had that conversation with my wife. We had just bought our house and I said "I don't know if we're going to lose our house, if we're going to have to move out of town. I don't know if I'm going to lose my job." She had just gotten a teaching job, too. For both of us, brand new jobs. I said "We may lose all of this if I turn my dad in." My wife looked at me and said "You gotta do what you gotta do." That's what Jesus stands for. That's what the Gospel stands for. So I was trying to figure that out and as a

pastor, what is it that causes people to turn hurting people away? And to ignore them? To silence them? To mistreat them? And I think a lot of that is this idea: there's this certain arrogance that happens without us even knowing it as pastors, because we get addicted to success, to the powerful testimonies, to these nice, clean stories.

I've done presentations before where I say "We've become addicted to cardboard testimonies." On the one side of the cardboard it says one thing, and it says something like "I was addicted to drugs." They turn it around and on the back side it says "Now I've been clean for five years" or whatever. Then they march the next person across the stage. And there's the melodramatic music in the background because we're Americans, and we gotta drum it up and do it big and we gotta market it. And so we march all these people across the stage, and immediately I try to put myself into the shoes of survivors of abuse. Immediately the question that came to my mind is "What the heck would I write on the back of my cardboard?" There is no instantaneous transformation and "Now I have all this joy in the Lord." Like, what the heck do I write on the back of my piece of cardboard? So survivors face this dilemma. Their story doesn't fit the narrative of these big powerful testimonies, because they're struggling.

NATALIE: So true.

JIMMY: And ministers, quite frankly, it's exhausting. I'm not being mean or rude. Just as people who work with other people, if you look at the burnout rate of people who work within advocacy work, the burnout rate is through the roof. It's exhausting. But until you're willing to enter into the lives and the mess of other people and actually be there with them and actually commit to it, you're not going to ever have time for them. I think as Americans we've become addicted to this model of instant transformations, and anybody who doesn't instantaneously forgive their abuser or instantaneously heal or instantaneously stop threatening suicide, we just don't have time for them. And "You don't have enough faith," and all these cliches that we throw at them. And I really think that is the heart of a lot of the problem.

NATALIE: Yeah. I think, too, that maybe some of these spiritual leaders who have a knee jerk reaction that is not "Oh, I feel all this compassion for you, I need to help you"... maybe it's because they've never experienced a complicated or complex or extraordinarily painful situation in their own lives, or someone close to them has never experienced something like that. I know that for me, I have a child who has a mental illness, a diagnosed mental illness. I can't even describe the pain that our family has been in because of this particular situation. We have been on a journey of trying to get help and how to navigate all the layers of stuff that's going on because of it. But as a new mom with my first baby in my arms, I never knew that there could be such a thing.

I didn't know it existed, and if someone had a child who was going off the rails, I might not have said anything, but inside my mind I would have thought "Well, maybe they weren't a very good parent," or "Maybe they could have done things differently," or "Maybe it's their fault their child is like that." Instead of understanding the complexities and having compassion, and not even solving someone else's problems... I don't think pastors can necessarily solve all these problems. But just to be able to sit with compassion with somebody and to believe that what they're saying is true and validate them and have empathy, that's something I think we need to see more of, and I think maybe it's just that they haven't experienced these kinds of painful things in their own lives.

JIMMY: Yeah, I agree with you. There are a number of reasons. There's not just one reason why church leaders respond the way that they do. It's multi-layered. And I completely agree with you, I think that's another component. And I think another one is having lived with an abuser, having gone into ministry because my dad was a minister... I'm in ministry because of him. So it's not like he was this weirdo and off in a corner petting little kids on their head. That wasn't my dad. He was a normal, fun, funny, good preacher, good dad, always present, and went to ball games with all of his kids... 11 kids. He was a present father. So that's all I ever knew of him. So I think another layer to this is it takes an incredible amount of humility when you hear an allegation of abuse about someone who is beloved, who is your peer, who is your boss, who is whatever. All these church leaders, when allegations of abuse come out about their church deacons and their elders, and their pastors, it takes an incredible amount of humility to admit that you've been fooled and you've been played your entire life by the person you loved and you trusted. I know because I lived it. It takes an incredible amount of humility. And I think part of the problem is these church leaders are so quick to defend their friends and their buddies. I see it every single day. And they're like, "No it couldn't be him." And they're in so much denial, not because they love that kids are being abused or adult women are being abused. It's not because they love the abuse. It's because they don't have the humility to step back and detach themselves emotionally from the person who is their best friend and to look at the facts objectively.

NATALIE: Right.

JIMMY: And that is a tough, tough thing to do, I'm telling you. And I had to do it instantaneously, I mean, immediately. I had a sobbing victim sitting three feet across from me at my desk, telling me that my dad sexually abused her for years when she was a kid. If you don't think that was a tough pill to swallow in that moment, to believe her, think again.

NATALIE: Yeah, I can't even imagine, can't even imagine. So your dad... was his focus all outside of the family, so the family was protected, but outside it was...?

JIMMY: So I'm going to do a spoiler alert. We have never spoken publicly about this, so this is actually the first time ever, and this is because there's a CBN series that's coming out where they're doing our story. And my youngest sister is actually the person who disclosed to me. So it was inside of the family which makes it that much tougher, because it wasn't just going on and we didn't know it. It was going on, I mean, right in front of us, under our noses. And we were clueless. We didn't know, we had no idea, none of us. We were shocked. So yeah, he was both incestuous in and outside of the family. And again, there were twenty-three victims, but we think there are many more. This is weird stuff. This is the kind of stuff people don't prepare you for. And it's never ending. The ripple effects are never ending.

I keynoted an event a couple of months ago, and I had a woman come up to me and she said "I hope you don't find this really inappropriate. I apologize if this is bad, but I need to tell you about this. Your dad abused this family," and she mentioned the family. And actually, my mom had spoken about this family and suspected that my dad had abused these two girls who were sisters. They were both mentally challenged. They had some kind of mental disability and I'm not sure what it was. The one sister got pregnant, and she ended up losing the baby. And she said there were rumors for a long time that the time period fit. She said "We think that may be your dad." You don't think that was a tough pill to swallow too? There's just this whole sea of unknowns. And it takes a tremendous amount of humility to accept it and to say "We were fooled." I mean, on so many levels. And to have to have the humility to do that and to stand with victims and to say "I not only believe you, but I support you, and I defend you, and I'm going to stand by your side whatever that looks like." And I'm still trying to figure out what that looks like.

Today, ironically, is the birthday of what would have been the 46th birthday of my oldest brother. Three, almost four years ago, I had a nine day old baby. It was my youngest son Isaac. Nine days old. My wife (whose name is Natalie, by the way), she had just put Isaac to sleep but was having a hard time putting him down, so she tapped out. My phone rings and it's one of my other sisters, and she told me... she said "Mike's dead." I said "What?" And so (her name's Mandy), so Mandy and I were the first ones to show up at mom's house. Mom still lives in the house that we grew up in in Shanksville. And my mom is in her bed just sobbing, just sobbing, just crying out, screaming, wailing. She looks up at me and says "How much more can this family take?" And she said "Here you are," and she was apologizing to me and said "You're the one who got the call about your dad, you're the one who had to report your dad, you're the one who

had to lead your church through this, you're the one who had to show up to the one victim's family and tell the parents, you're the one who your dad called," (because dad didn't know I'd reported him. He called me after he'd given his confession to confide in me.) She said "And here you are, showing up to take care of your mom when I lost my oldest baby." And she said "How much more can this family take?" And all of the family ended up showing up at mom's house, everyone who lived in state, and so we're all sitting around and crying and then there's this moment where there's this awkward silence in the room. And I felt what the awkward silence was. So I looked at the family and said "I'll be the one to make the call." And it was "Who is going to call the prison and tell dad that Mike died?"

And there's just so many layers and so many ripple effects to this abuse that's never ending. It never stops. So I think people who haven't experienced it I don't think have the capacity to really truly understand, but at the same time, until we understand Jesus and know Jesus and look at His mission to reach out to those broken people, that level of brokenness, you don't have to experience it to be able to understand it. And you don't have to experience it to be able to have basic compassion and understanding.

NATALIE: Yeah, I agree, I agree. Before we close, I wanted to go down a little bit of a different path. Actually, I want to circle back to the videos you mentioned earlier, the "Champions of Illusion" videos. I'm wondering how that would relate to, for example, many of the women I work with. They're still living with their spouses, a lot of them are. They struggle with the fact that their spouses seem so good in so many different ways. And what made me think of this is you were describing your dad, how he was your hero and he spent time with the family. They seem like a normal, healthy, good person in so many ways. Yet they do these sideways things that are so destructive and so painful. And they have a hard time putting those two things together in their mind. So they keep going back and forth: "Well, is it just in my head? Am I making a big deal out of nothing? Am I not giving him the benefit of the doubt? What's real? What's not?" There's so much deception. I'm just curious if those videos talk about that.

JIMMY: Yes and no. I really wrestled with that. My whole identity... I immediately entered into this identity crisis. "Who am I? Who is my dad? What was real from my childhood and what was fake?" Him leading a church and preaching and people being baptized...what part of that was real and what was fake? It was like this major identity crisis. What I started realizing pretty quick is not only was he a sexual abuser of one of the worst kinds, but he's labeled a SVP, a sexually violent predator, which a judge has to be the one to give that designation to you at the recommendation of the Sex Offender Assessment Board in the state capitol. As part of a plea deal that was removed but I found out pretty quickly from talking to victims of his and talking to law enforcement

and looking at records myself, he abused these kids in the worst possible, inhumane ways. When I talk to him still, to this day, according to him it was just sort of “Light petting over the clothes kind of thing.” So that was helpful for me to really break that down and understand “Yeah, people are capable of looking you right in the eye and telling you one thing and they’re doing something completely different.”

But one of the reasons I connected with Drs. Matnik and Martinez-Conde is because they talk about visual deception, and they actually studied magicians to shave off about 10 years of research for what they couldn’t replicate in the lab. And it’s how the brain responds to these visual illusions. One of the things I found out from talking to my dad, letters back and forth from prison and so forth, is that much of the abuse that he did was intentionally in front of their parents. In front of... I don’t mean two rooms over. I’m talking in front of, right in front of their face. So, Larry Nassar abused, at least that we know of, one hundred and fifty victims with mom and dad in the room: mom and dad or mom or dad in the examination room with him. He was full on anally and vaginally penetrating his victims. So we started going back and started looking at the science of that saying “What is it about us that makes us blind to the abuse?”

And I started looking at technique. Not behaviors, but technique. Because there’s something about technique... that this is more than just being attracted to children or being attracted to being abusive, verbally abusive. There’s more to it than that. Not only did they like abusing and inflicting harm on other people, but they showcase it. They flaunt it and they use techniques to keep the abuse blind to other people so that the victim knows that they’re being abused in front of other people, and in their minds they’re screaming out “Why is this person seeing what’s happening to me and they aren’t doing anything about it?” But the reality is that the abuser is using techniques to keep that abuse blind to the people who are right in front of them. And they know that no one is responding to it. The abuser knows it. So it’s just another level of deception and wickedness. So as we talk about the science behind it, the nice thing about those videos and that presentation is that there’s nothing gory, there’s nothing that’s triggering to victims of abuse. It’s just talking about the science behind illusions and deception and how that works and how your brain responds and how we’re not nearly as perceptive as we think we are. So all the church leaders who arrogantly come back and say “Well, we’re keeping an eye and if anything were to happen we’d be the first to know about it.” Uh, no you wouldn’t. We have the science and the demonstrations to prove it. None of us are as perceptive as we think we are. We all have these visual illusions because our brain creates the reality as we know it.

NATALIE: Yes. Well, I think that even happens with the reading of the Bible. We’ve heard something for so many years, when we read a verse... even earlier when you were

going over the “Do not forsake the assembly” verse, even when you were using the correct Greek words translated into English, I still had a hard time getting out of what I’d heard before. So when you hear something or are immersed in something, that’s what you’re going to see. Your brain is going to fill in the gap.

JIMMY: Absolutely, absolutely, it does. So abusers know, too, that their victims are questioning this. The whole Jekyll and Hyde thing: abusers know that the victims are wrestling with that, so they play into that, and that just becomes another vulnerability. They do things like gaslighting and things like that. That’s not just a behavioral thing, that’s actually a technique. That’s a very calculated technique. And I think that if people understood the precision with which abusers deceive other people within the faith communities and otherwise, they’d be astounded. It is really complex. I think that’s why the analogy with magicians is a really good analogy. Because for magicians on stage, it’s just a routine. They’re not being wowed by their own tricks.

NATALIE: Right.

JIMMY: A magician has gone through methodically, step by step, something they’ve practiced in a mirror over and over again and in their minds they’re thinking (a good magician will tell you this), in their minds, a magician is thinking “I can’t believe this actually works.”

NATALIE: Right.

JIMMY: They’re doing tricks right in front of their face. So for me, I take a different approach. It’s not about teaching people red-flag behaviors, because those are so generic that they don’t tell us anything about technique. They give us some generic things about behaviors. Some of them are helpful, some of them are not. But what I do is I say we need to spin the perspective, spin the camera around a little bit. And for us, it’s not about who among us could be an abuser. I bring people up on stage, I teach them the techniques, I teach them how to be a magician. So I talk about technique a lot and say “Here’s how the trick is done, here’s what they’re doing, step by step.” The flip side of that is if you fill a whole audience full of professional magicians, what does that do to the stage magicians show? He no longer has a show, because no one in the audience is wowed. They can see what he’s doing, how he’s doing it, and they all understand technique.

So when we understand the actual technique of deception and what abusers are doing, not the behaviors, not the “Well, they’re narcissistic, and for them it’s all about control”... that stuff is true, but it tells me nothing about technique. I want to know

about technique. I want to know how they pulled it off. I want to know how they pulled the wool over everyone's eyes and did this stuff. These guys are grabbing women and sexually harassing women in churches. You'd be shocked how many stories I hear about that... of adult women, where these men, right in front of other people, they're pulling at them, they're grabbing at them. For me it makes sense. I understand technique, but all that to say, if we know the technique, what they're doing, how they're doing it, how they're keeping us blind, we can now step in in real time, and step in and intervene. This works, it's not just theory. I've trained several people to do this, and they've seen abusers abusing right in front of them, and they've intervened and stopped people right in front of them. People have been kicked out of church and it's not hypothetical. They actually speak to the victims and the victims verify "Yeah, he's been doing this to me for years." It's pretty exciting stuff. I'm kind of a nerd.

NATALIE: Well, I think it's fascinating, I've never heard of anybody doing this actually before, talking about this before in the church, at least. So I'm really glad that you're doing this, and I'm going to refer people to those videos. I'll put those links at the bottom. We're going to close now, because this is a podcast, and we're finished. But I would love to talk to you again in the future because there's so much we could explore. Thanks so much for taking the time to join me for this, especially from a pastor's perspective. I think it's healing for me and for the people that are listening to this who have been spiritually abused by spiritual leaders to actually know that there actually are good pastors out there. There are good shepherds out there who do have the heart of Christ, who do have the knee jerk reaction of "I want to protect you," not "I can't wait to throw you to the wolves," and that's healing for us, so I really appreciate that.

JIMMY: Absolutely, thank you for having me.