

Growing grassroots ministry brings healing to survivors of sex abuse

By Roxanne King
Catholic News Service

DENVER — Shedding light on darkness to help men and women heal from the evil of sexual abuse and reclaim their souls — that is the goal of the grass-roots ministry Spiritual Survivors.

In April — Sexual Assault Awareness Month — the ministry will celebrate its third year. Founded by three laywomen and a priest at Spirit of Christ Church in Arvada, Spiritual Survivors recently expanded to a second location, Holy Family Church in Denver. The growth was a fitting way to observe the ministry's anniversary.

"We feel a commitment to this ministry and see a need out there," said co-founder and group facilitator Marie Powell, 48.

Since its inception, about 60 people have attended the ministry's support group in Arvada, with some traveling up to 45 minutes to participate. Organizers hope the Holy Family site, which is more centrally located, will make the ministry more accessible.

Spiritual Survivors is neither therapy nor counseling, emphasized Powell. Rather, it is a support group to aid the spiritual healing of adult survivors of sexual abuse.

Though founded by Catholics, Spiritual Survivors is open to people of any and no faith belief. And while the ministry is conducted at two Catholic parishes with the blessing of the Denver Archdiocese, it is not a program of the church and does not report to any archdiocesan office.

"The archdiocese is committed to aid the healing of people who have suffered sexual abuse, so we're happy to provide meeting space to Spiritual Survivors," said Chris Pond, director of the archdiocese's Child and Youth Protection Office. "We're excited by their success so far and we're happy they are expanding."

About a dozen people usually attend the twice-monthly meetings, where everything shared is held in strictest confidence.

"What we're about is providing a safe place for survivors to talk about their abuse and the impact it's had on their lives and their spirituality," Powell said. When such evil happens, not only does the victim cry, but God cries, she said.

"The message for anyone that's a survivor," she said, "is that there is hope for healing. It's difficult, but it's less difficult than the choice to not heal. And it leads to such light."

Powell, whose career background is as a health care liaison, is not a survivor of sexual abuse. She calls herself "a companion to survivors on their journey to healing."

Spiritual Survivors' co-founder and co-facilitator Terri Renella, 47, did suffer sexual abuse as a child and was raped at gunpoint at age 24. She spent five years volunteering for a rape crisis center and found it "some of the most rewarding work I have ever done."

Even so, she said, her soul was still wounded from the sexual abuse she had suffered at 8 from a brother twice her age. When he died a dozen years ago, his death brought up all the pain the successful businesswoman had sought to escape in being a high achiever and workaholic. At 35 she finally sought therapy, where healing began.

But "my soul was still damaged," she said. "I had not made my connection to God."

Raised Mormon, Renella began attending the Catholic Church, the faith of her third husband, seven years ago. She entered the church at the Easter Vigil in 2004.

"There was no doubt the Holy Spirit came into me," Renella said. "It was a phenomenal experience. I had my spiritual healing."

A week later, Spiritual Survivors' co-founder Father Bob Kinkel, then the pastor of Spirit of Christ, announced the new ministry to help survivors of sexual abuse.

"I went to him and said, 'I have to help,'" Renella recalled. "Now I get up in front of groups and say, 'I am a survivor of sexual abuse and I am not ashamed.'"

She tells people she is an example of the healing power of God's grace. The evil that was done to her, the dirty secret, the shame, no longer has power over her as she walks in the light of Christ.

"I found my way back to God," Renella said, adding that she realized the man she had constantly sought in relationships was Christ.

"I am joyful," she declared. "And it is through God, through the healing of the Holy Spirit. I want to bring that to other survivors. I want them to see there's hope."

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