

Some Faith Leaders Victimize Rape Survivors Again

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THIRD IN A SERIES

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Simone Oliver had always been called, as they say in the religious community. She was active in the Baptist church throughout her youth, playing piano for the youth choir and even ghost-writing sermons for several pastors as a teen. She loved scripture, loved preaching, and loved God. For her, church was heaven on earth.

But it was also hell. At 15 years old, Oliver’s then-pastor called her into his church office, grabbed her, put his tongue in her mouth, and fondled her until she broke away. It was the third time in her life she had been sexually assaulted, already a rape survivor at 12 years old at the hands of her sister’s first husband, and again at 13 by a family friend staying in her home.

Still, her faith did not

waver. In fact, it grew stronger as Oliver transitioned from being a public school teacher to a minister.

In the mid-2000s, she took on an associate pastor’s role at a non-denominational church in New Jersey. The founding pastor tried to court her for years until she finally acquiesced and the two

And no group leans on the church more than Blacks.

“While the U.S. is generally considered a highly religious nation, African-Americans are markedly more religious on a variety of measures than the U.S. population as a whole, including level of affiliation with religion, attendance at religious services, frequen-

women. The report found that 84 percent of Black women say religion is very important to them and 59 percent say they attend religious services at least once a week.

As committed as she was, Oliver eventually left that church, broke off the affair with the pastor, began dating the man who would

threats to me.”

In 2011, five days before her wedding, the pastor’s behavior moved beyond idle threats.

“It’s a miracle story I’m here and alive, because this man stabbed me 30 times. I was paralyzed from the waist down,” Oliver recounted. Years later, she still remembers his final threat, prior to the day of the attack: “‘When I’m finished with you, you will not get married, you will not have a ministry, and Princeton will never have you.’ That was the last thing he said to me.”

Oliver was stabbed mostly in her abdomen and back, damaging her spinal cord and liver. Her former co-pastor was arrested walking down the street covered in her blood, still holding his hunting knife.

Survivors Need More than Prayer

Sharon Ellis Davis, a former criminalist in the Chicago Police Department and retired pastor, knows a bit about crime from more than one perspective.

She said, “I was married to a police officer, and there was a domestic abuse issue

and sexual abuse. It was dismissed all the time. It was a matter of, ‘You all stop,’ or ‘Don’t be so bad,’ or ‘It’ll be okay.’ But never ‘I hear you, I understand you, I believe you.’ Even if [the department] knew the abuser was guilty, there was that code where you don’t rat on other police officers.”

So Davis channeled her frustration into something useful. She successfully lobbied for an internal domestic violence advocate, a civilian who would support and speak for domestic violence victims in police officers’ homes and became a full-time police chaplain.

But in Davis’ own church experience – first in the Pentecostal church as a child, then in the United Church of Christ as an adult – she saw parallels to the way she was treated by the police department.

“The church was nice to me, but they didn’t know what to do with me,” she said. “I need more than prayer, I need more than a hug.”

‘He said to me – not of himself – but he said, ‘A man can commit murder, do his time, put on a suit, and still be a man. But when a woman’s reputation is ruined, she is ruined’

began a secret relationship. However, a year later, he decided to marry someone else. Still, the affair continued.

“I couldn’t get out. It was almost like sinking into an abyss,” she remembered. “I had gone to someone in the church to let them know this was going on. And they pretty much turned on me.”

cy of prayer and religion’s importance in life,” according to a report by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

Black Women are the Most Religious

And among the most religiously committed, no segment is more committed than African-American

become her husband, and was accepted into Princeton Theological Seminary. As her life got better, her former co-pastor’s behavior grew worse. He sent threats to her regularly, and began stalking her and her then-fiancé.

She recalled, “He said to me – not of himself – but he said, ‘A man can commit murder, do his time, put on a suit, and still be a man. But when a woman’s reputation is ruined, she is ruined.’ Those were his



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