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SPOTLIGHT

BREAK THE STORY. BREAK THE SILENCE.

A FILM DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR LEADERS AND
MEMBERS OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

"If it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes a village to abuse one."

— a line from 'Spotlight'



THE TRUE STORY BEHIND THE SCANDAL THAT SHOOK THE WORLD.

ABOUT THE MOVIE:

Based on true events, *Spotlight* is a critically acclaimed major motion picture that chronicles The Boston Globe's Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalism that ultimately unshrouded pervasive societal secrecy surrounding the clergy sexual abuse epidemic in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. While previous stories on individual "bad apple" priests had occasionally appeared in the newspaper, this film tells the story of the Globe's commitment to documenting the failed systems, both in the church and the broader society, that led to the perpetuation of the abuse of children by scores of priests over decades. At the end of the film, Boston is portrayed as a microcosm of a much-broader, interconnected system of power, secrecy, denial and corruption that failed the Roman Catholic Church worldwide and, most especially and importantly, its children and other vulnerable people.

WHY THIS STUDY GUIDE?

After viewing *Spotlight*, it is quite possible to leave the darkened theater, disturbed by what you have just witnessed, but remaining in your own form of self-denial, perhaps pointing fingers at failures within the Roman Catholic hierarchy but not stopping to consider the systems that are in place, or not, to protect children in your own religious tradition. Abuse of children can take place in any religious or secular organization, most especially in those that do not insist on having in place

systems of training, oversight, accountability and transparent record-keeping.

The United Church of Christ is committed to the safety and protection of children. In order to foster conversation about and learnings from this important film, this study guide has been produced with various constituencies in mind: members of the UCC's regional Committees on Ministry (which authorize ministers on behalf of the entire denomination and periodically may be called upon to review allegations of ministerial misconduct); Authorized Ministers and Congregational Leaders; local church groups, and Members in Discernment for Authorized Ministry.

We are encouraging our members and leaders to see this film and then to reflect, both individually and with others, on its implications for our life together as the United Church of Christ and why systems of accountability and oversight remain of utmost importance for a church committed to the values of justice and extravagant welcome.

Spotlight, the film, is also an excellent case study for exploring codes of ethics for a variety of professions: clergy, police, attorneys and the press. This study guide, too, can be used by moviegoers to explore ethical decision-making through multiple lenses of accountability.

This movie raises difficult, traumatic issues. Be prepared for reactions from survivors and others who have been impacted by abuse.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION BY AUTHORIZED MINISTERS AND MEMBERS IN DISCERNMENT:

1. The Personal: Throughout the movie, we see individuals dealing with their own personal responses to the knowledge of sexual abuse by clergy and its cover-up: the victims/survivors; the members of the press and their families; the attorneys, police and members of the judicial system; church bureaucrats; and others.

With which character(s) did you most identify and why?

If this movie brings up emotional responses because of your personal experience or that of others whom you know, what systems of support are available?

Why would it be important for Authorized Ministers and Members in Discernment to

process their own personal responses in an appropriate supportive relationship?

Is it ever appropriate to share personal stories of abuse (your own or others) with one's constituents (parishioners, counselees, clergy colleagues, others)? Why or why not?

2. The Professional: In the movie, the passion, professionalism and commitment of the investigative journalists were palpable. In one scene, the characters Mike Rezendes and Sacha Pfeiffer (played by Mark Ruffalo and Rachel McAdams, respectively) share how their professional involvement in this investigation is affecting their own spiritual journeys.

If one of these characters was your parishioner or counselee, how would you respond to them?

What, if anything, in your preparation for, or experience in, ministry equips you for this kind of interaction?

Which of the **Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers of the United Church of Christ relate to competencies needed to exercise pastoral leadership around the complexities of sexual abuse? What kinds of learning/formational experiences to you need to further develop these competencies?**

What are your legal, professional and ethical obligations, as authorized ministers,

QUESTIONS FOR CONGREGATIONAL GROUPS:

1. A line in the movie says, “If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one.” Do you agree with this statement, why or why not?
2. This movie illustrates the tension between systems and individuals. Reflect on how each member of the *Spotlight* team wrestles with his/her own personal experiences in relationship to the story they are investigating.
3. Where are ethics learned? Are there different codes of ethics for different professions: Clergy, Police, Attorneys, Press? How were ethical decisions at play for each of these professions in the movie?
4. How much do you and others in your church know about systems, policies and procedures in place to ensure oversight and accountability of authorized ministers in the United Church of Christ? Why is it important that local church members know, appreciate and support systems in place within the wider church?
5. Does your local church have safe church guidelines in place that prescribe processes for criminal background checks for volunteers and church professionals, appropriate interactions with children and vulnerable adults, and other safeguards?
6. The film makes clear that a minister’s religious identity in and on behalf of the church creates a power differential with his/her parishioners.

After seeing the movie, why is it important that continued accountability be expected of a minister who desires to maintain ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ?

How does your church support or encourage that accountability or, perhaps, diminish or undermine it?

SPOTLIGHT is indeed a cautionary tale for us all. While non-Catholics might be tempted to walk away from the theater with just a tinge of self-righteousness, assuming that this is a Catholic problem, don't give into that temptation. And let us not spend time arguing over whether 'the problem' is greater or lesser in our faith community. Neither will serve us well. The fact is that sexual abuse of children, teens, and adults by those designated as faith leaders is a serious and disturbing reality in every faith community. No exceptions.

—The Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune
FaithTrust Institute

to report allegations of abuse to legal authorities, as well as suspected clergy misconduct to denominational officials?

3. The Ethical: This film shines a “spotlight” on professional ethics in many different ways, including ethics in law and law enforcement, journalism, and the church (for both clergy and laity).

What were the ethical questions that were raised for you, as an Authorized Minister or Member in Discernment?

How does the church, in your experience, practice its own ethics and hold one another accountable? Why are systems of accountability important? Does the church have a

public role in addressing questions of ethics and ethical practices for its laity?

What in your experience has prepared you for ethical discourse, practice, and prophetic witness?

How does the Ministerial Code of Ethics inform your understanding of yourself as an ethical/moral agent?

What kinds of lifelong learning experiences do you think will be important for your own ongoing ministerial development around ethics and ethical decision making?

4. The Systemic: In the film, *Spotlight*, the character of Robby Robinson, played by Micheal Keaton, pushes the investigation

toward what he identifies as “the real story,” that of the system that allowed the abuse to happen and created a culture of secrecy around it.

What are the characteristics of UCC polity that contribute to, or hinder, a healthy and transparent system? What practices help maximize health and transparency within the system? What is the role of an Authorized Minister or Member in Discernment with regard to the systems that comprise the UCC and in which the UCC participates?

How can you imagine this film being used as a teaching and learning tool in theological education, faith formation, or church leadership development?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION BY UCC COMMITTEES ON MINISTRY:

In United Church of Christ polity, which is non-hierarchical, the ecclesiastical office of “bishop” or “cardinal” is not lodged in the office of one person, but with regional Committees on Ministry, charged with providing oversight of authorized ministers and the ongoing fitness for ministry of those ordained, commissioned or licensed. Yet, for purposes of discussion, it might be helpful for Committees on Ministry to ask questions of themselves similar to the ones wrestled with by the journalists in the film.

1. A strong sense of role clarity allowed the newspaper editor to understand the distinct role he played in the community.

How has role clarity, both individually and collectively, helped your Committee on Ministry do its best job related to oversight of authorized ministers?

2. Members of the *Spotlight* team were asked to preserve confidentiality for a time. The goal of this confidentiality was accountability and, ultimately, greater transparency.

What are your Committee’s best practices around confidentiality during a fitness review? Upon completion of the fitness review, what are your Committee’s best practices around transparency?

3. Members of the *Spotlight* team were able to do certain tasks — interview survivors, research and publish their stories — yet, there were other tasks that, as journalists, they could not do, such as argue cases in court, or provide therapy, or offer healing to families. Similarly, Committee on Ministry oversight in the United Church of Christ offers credibility and confidence to a minister’s next ministry setting, that he or she has been found trustworthy so far. Though it can make a difference in preventing further harm, by itself Committee on Ministry actions cannot provide either restitution or healing for a person who has already been wronged. Likewise, though it can provide a reality check for an authorized minister, it cannot ease a minister’s personal self-growth work. And though it can uphold covenant with local churches, it cannot by itself restore trust or repair disruption in a local church where misconduct has occurred.

Given this reality, where has your Committee acknowledged those things beyond its own ability or authority? What is your hope and prayer for those involved?

4. “It’s in the clips.” In one scene, a reporter on the *Spotlight* team takes a historical clip to the team leader, refreshing his memory about something that happened before. In another scene, the church’s litigant tells him the stories were already sent to The Globe. Obviously it’s important not only to keep documentation internally, but to know how and where it is kept.

How does your Committee keep good records, both for yourselves and others that will serve after you?

SYSTEMS OF ACCOUNTABILITY, LEARNING AND SUPPORT IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

In the United Church of Christ, we actively seek to create a safe environment for all people to experience the love of God. To that end

SPOTLIGHT is yet another

opportunity to encourage important conversations in every church, every organization, where children are served, and thus potentially vulnerable. If the present and future church is to be fully trusted with the well-being of children, it will be our systems of oversight and accountability, not our words or reputations, that will demonstrate our most sincere commitment.

—The Rev. Dr. J. Bennett Guess
United Church of Christ

the UCC authorizes ministers through local or regional Committees on Ministry, which maintain oversight for any clergy who holds standing in that Association and a Committee’s decisions/actions are done on behalf of, and shared across, the entire denomination.

All UCC clergy are asked to participate regularly in **Boundary Awareness Training** and must complete a Criminal

Background Check to use the profiles system to seek a call.

If questions of ministerial ethics arise there is a **process** called a Fitness Review that takes place to determine if that minister can maintain good standing in the denomination.

Additionally, congregations are provided with helpful resources such as the **Safe Conduct Workbench** from the Insurance Board on how to practice safe church environments for children.

The UCC strives toward a culture of healthy education, and has produced resources including **Our Whole Lives** for dialogue around boundaries, bodies, relationships and sexuality across the life span.

Ecumenical, interfaith, and non-profit organizations increasingly embrace learnings toward health and ethics. We commend resources from the **FaithTrust Institute**, a leading authority committed to working together to end sexual and domestic violence.

Which resources are you familiar with? Which resources would you like to know more about?

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE:

The National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800/656-HOPE (4673)
The National Child Abuse Hotline: 800/4-A-CHILD
SNAP Survivors Network <snapnetwork.org>

To report abuse occurring within a ministry setting of the United Church of Christ, contact your regional Conference Minister. A directory of Conference contacts can be found at ucc.org/about-us_conference. Additional navigational support is available by calling 216/736-3881.