

DARVO in the Church: When the Abuser Plays the Victim and the Victim Is Seen as the Abuser

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One of the most devastating moments in an abuse disclosure can come after the victim tells the truth. The person who caused the harm may suddenly claim to be the one who was harmed, while the person who came forward is portrayed as deceitful, divisive, vindictive, unstable, or even abusive. This pattern has a name: **DARVO**.

DARVO stands for **Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender**.

Psychologist Jennifer J. Freyd coined the term to describe a response perpetrators may use when confronted about wrongdoing. First, the person denies what happened. Then they attack the credibility, character, motives, memory, or morality of the person making the accusation. Finally, they reverse the roles, presenting themselves as the victim and the person reporting the harm as the offender.

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How DARVO Works

The denial might sound like, “That never happened,” “You misunderstood,” or “It was consensual.” The attack can be more personal: “She is bitter,” “He is disgruntled,” “They want attention,” or “They are trying to destroy the church.” Then comes the reversal: “My family is suffering,” “My ministry is being attacked,” “I have been slandered,” or “This accusation is abuse.”

The devastating part is that the original allegation can quickly disappear from the center of the conversation. Instead of asking, **What happened?**, everyone begins asking, **What is wrong with the person who reported it?**

Freyd has described how this reversal can create the impression that the abuser is the wronged person while the victim or concerned observer becomes the offender. The person attempting to hold someone accountable is suddenly forced onto the defensive.

When DARVO Happens in a Church

When the accused person is a church leader, the consequences can become much larger than the interaction between two individuals. A pastor may have years of relational capital, a respected public reputation, spiritual authority, loyal friends, financial influence, and deep relationships within the congregation. The accusation may therefore be experienced by others not simply as a report of harm, but as a threat to the church itself.

That is where DARVO can become communal.

The leader says, “I am being attacked,” and the congregation begins to say the same thing. The survivor is described as divisive, bitter, rebellious, unstable, or dangerous. The report becomes “gossip.” Accountability becomes an “attack on God’s work.” Protecting the church’s reputation becomes more urgent than protecting the person who reported harm.

Research helps explain why this can happen. Experimental studies have found that exposure to DARVO can influence how observers perceive both the alleged perpetrator and the victim. Observers exposed to DARVO have rated perpetrators as less abusive, less responsible, and more believable, while rating victims as more abusive and less believable.

In other words, DARVO does not only affect the person making the accusation. **It can change how everyone else interprets the story.**

The Confusion of Being Called the Abuser

For a survivor, being called the abuser after reporting abuse can be profoundly disorienting. The accusation does not merely attack their story. It attacks their identity, morality, relationships, faith, and sense of reality.

A survivor may already be wrestling with shame, fragmented memories, fear, delayed disclosure, or uncertainty about how others will respond. Then the person they accuse, along with people they trust, tells them that *they* are the problem.

They may begin asking themselves: *Did I misunderstand? Am I destroying the church? Am I being cruel? Is my anger proof that I am abusive? Am I sinning by telling the truth?*

This is one reason DARVO can be so powerful. The survivor is no longer simply trying to explain what happened. They are suddenly forced to defend their character.

Research has connected exposure to DARVO with increased self-blame among people confronting wrongdoing. More recent research has also examined associations between DARVO exposure and post-trauma symptoms.

When the Church Becomes Part of the Harm

The original abuse may have been committed by one person, but the harm can continue when a community protects that person through denial, character attacks, social shunning, spiritual pressure, or reputation management.

This is closely related to what researchers call **institutional betrayal**: when an institution people trust fails to protect them or responds to harm in ways that compound the injury.

A church does not protect itself by immediately defending its leader or attacking the person who reported harm. A healthy response begins with

safety, non-retaliation, independent reporting pathways, preservation of evidence, trauma-informed care, and an impartial process.

DARVO does not, by itself, prove that an allegation is true. Not every denial or defensive response is DARVO, and allegations still require fair and independent investigation. But the possibility of DARVO is precisely why churches should be careful when an accused leader suddenly becomes the public victim and the person reporting harm becomes the public offender.

A church should never confuse protecting its reputation with protecting its people.

The abuse is not necessarily over when someone discloses it. It can continue through denial, character assassination, spiritual pressure, social exclusion, and institutional protection of the person accused.

A church does not protect its witness by silencing wounded people. It protects its witness by telling the truth about power, refusing to reverse victim and offender, and making safety and accountability more important than reputation.

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