

Full transcript of a conversation recorded in September 2018 between Sterling Van Wagenen and a survivor of sexual abuse at his hand. Published by the Truth & Transparency Foundation.
All words in red represent what was removed from the published recording.

Sterling: 00:00:06 Hi.

[REDACTED] How are you?

Sterling: I'm good.

[REDACTED] Good. This is [REDACTED]. [REDACTED], Sterling.

[REDACTED] Hi, nice to meet you.

Sterling: Nice to see you.

[REDACTED] Yeah, come on in, Sterling.

Sterling: Thank you. I found your directions were great.

[REDACTED] Yeah, without the directions, good luck. Yeah,

Sterling: it's a little tricky.

[REDACTED] Good luck finding it. Well, [REDACTED] is just going to go downstairs watch some TV.

[REDACTED] Yeah.

[REDACTED] You and I can revisit.

Sterling: We can, that's why we're here.

[REDACTED] Yeah. Unless you had any ... Yeah, I think it would be better if you were not here I guess.

[REDACTED] Okay, yeah.

[REDACTED] Which actually, whichever you prefer.

Sterling: Yeah, no, that's fine.

[REDACTED] I'll just be around.

Sterling: Okay.

[REDACTED] Yeah, just go watch TV downstairs, babe. Yeah, I got that for you if you're thirsty.

Sterling: [00:00:14](#)

Thank you, I appreciate that.

■

Yeah. Not the fun circumstances to meet under.

Sterling:

No, but you know what? I saw your courage in doing this. I can't tell you how brave I think you are to follow through on this.

■

Yeah, I wanted to.

Sterling:

I understand that, for sure.

■

The whole weekend I keep feeling like yeah, let's just bag it. Every day of the weekend and all weekend, I just felt sick. Why am I doing this to myself, is it really necessary to do this to myself? But it just keeps resurfacing for me.

Sterling:

Sure.

■

I don't like to be one of those people that dwells on things, I don't like to be one of those people that ... I don't want my past to define me but at the same time, my whole life I've wondered. There's a lot of things I've wondered.

Sterling:

Sure.

■

Yeah. So anyway, I have some notes here.

Sterling:

Good, sure.

■

Yeah, because what I did, it was this morning. I woke up and I thought gosh, I'll probably going to get all panicky and nervous and not remember what it is that's weighing on me. Your kids and ■, they might've passed on to you kind of the effect that this has had on me over the years.

Sterling:

Yeah, I talked to ■ I know she saw you and spent some time with you. ■ said something's changed. So yeah, I've heard especially from ■

■

Yeah. In one sense, it kind of made my childhood from that point forward just changed everything for me.

Sterling:

I'm so sorry.

00:02:09

It's not so blissful anymore. But I just wrote down some and they probably passed some of these on to you as far as ... From that point forward, I started sleeping with a knife at my side.

Sterling:

Gosh.

Yeah, a hunting knife. Lots of nightmares, I was always afraid of the dark. I've always been afraid of men especially men ... I've always been really suspicious of men in the church for some reason, I don't know if that will make sense. But with what I knew about you being a professor and being a filmmaker and having that kind of notoriety in the church, it always just made me all suspicious of ... Not just you, I've heard lots of stories about other people.

Sterling:

So have I. **Yeah, I understand that.**

So it's just very suspicious for my own kids, anxiety when it comes to my own kids. For my kids to be away from me, I will have like a full-blown-

Sterling:

Anxiety attack.

Yeah. When my daughter went on the Young Women's over nighter and I had to talk to every single leader. I had to know who is going to be there and I even had to tell the Bishopric, I don't want them spending the night up there. Then I can't sleep. When they're away from me, you can imagine. Then the emotions range from anger, resentment.

Sterling:

Sure.

Anxiety.

Sterling:

Of course,

So that's kind of like and it's just been an ongoing thing for me. I think it's amplified with my own children. I think in my 20s or in my early 20s before I had kids, I don't think that I was ... But since I've had my own kids, it just keeps resurfacing and my kids keep asking me, "Why are you the only dad that's so paranoid and so suspicious of other people?" You can imagine.

Sterling:

I can imagine, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I did that damage to you.

00:04:30

Yeah.

Sterling:

Gosh.

Yeah. I've always wanted to ask you, what was going through your mind that night, what was going on with you?

Sterling:

Well, obviously, it was a really dark time for me. I was struggling in my business, at the time I had a film production company with a partner in Texas. We just had a project go south on us. We didn't know where the next paycheck was coming from. [REDACTED] and I were having a hard time. In fact, that night before I came downstairs, I'd said to her I want a divorce. This may sound to you but I expected her to say no, we're not going to go there but instead, she said okay. That just pushed me into a dark place. I remember getting out of bed that night and I remember saying just a very quick prayer, "Oh God, please, not this." I came downstairs.

Sterling:

So that's what was going on, there were problems in the business, [REDACTED] had said yes, okay, let's get a divorce. I've always struggled with depression, I've had a problem with depression since I was in elementary school. I didn't know what it was then. So I've tried a lot of different ways to stop the pain of the depression. That night, I was acting out sexually and that was what was going on with me. The pain was just so great. I was just trying to find a way to make a connection, a way to stop the pain. You were the victim, I'm so sorry for that.

Yeah, okay.

Sterling:

So that's what was going on with me. Does that help, does that make some kind of sense to you?

Yeah. Can I ask you a question? So that night when you were doing that, I was almost certain that you were doing the same to your own kid on the other couch.

Sterling:

Yeah, I wasn't.

Okay.

Sterling:

No, I wasn't.

Okay, yeah.

Sterling:

00:06:52

In fact, again I don't know this helps but this is the only time in my life I've ever done this. **This is the only time and I know** [REDACTED] said to me and [REDACTED] too that you were concerned that maybe there was a pattern of this abuse. That had gone on with my own kids or grandkids or with other people. This is the only time that has happened.

[REDACTED]

Okay. Were you sexually abused as a kid?

Sterling:

I was, actually. I was.

[REDACTED]

Do you remember the pain that caused you?

Sterling:

Well, I'm not sure how to put it. The sexual abuse came from my mother. In fact, I talked to a therapist about this. A pretty great length and an attempt to get a hold of that. Frankly, forgive my mother who is dead now. But frankly forgive her because I have some sense now of what she was going through at the time. So I think that was part of the reason for the depression and the anxiety I felt as a child and I felt all my adult life.

[REDACTED]

Okay.

Sterling:

So yeah, I have some understanding of what that pain is about.

[REDACTED]

Yeah, I understand. In all honesty, I have a hard time believing. I should tell you there's been times in the past where I've gone on Facebook and just venting about different things that I've read about, social, cultural events and stuff, social events and matters. I've gone on Facebook and I've said that I was molested or sexually abused by my best friend's dad at sleepover. Then I did at one point say that it was a BYU professor and LDS filmmaker without using your name. But I am aware of ... I want to get this over with and I want to just, to be honest with each other.

[REDACTED]

So someone did contact me and shared some information that was concerning. So with that said, I just want you to know that I'd really appreciate it if you just be honest with me. I do find it hard to believe when someone says that it only happened the one time and only time. I did get caught. I'm not the only one that finds that very hard to believe. So that's what I want to make sure that from you-

Sterling:

00:10:11

Yeah, I know, I understand where you're going with that. Maybe it would help to understand that I have acted sexually in other ways.

Okay. What is that look like, what do you mean?

Sterling:

Well, there was a period of time when I was visiting prostitutes.

Okay.

Sterling:

I had two or three affairs with other women. So again, with the depression and the anxiety, yeah, there were periods when I was acting out in other ways. So it's not like this is the only time I ever acted out and then I just totally stopped and I never acted out again. That's not accurate.

Okay.

Sterling:

So if that makes sense.

Yeah, that helps me a lot that you would say that.

Sterling:

But that's the only time I had ever done anything like I did to you.

To a child.

Sterling:

To a child.

Okay.

Sterling:

Yeah. That's the only time.

What do you think about and I'm probably skipping ahead. I'll just skip ahead in my question. What do you think about when people say that a child attraction is like ... I've read so much on the subject. What do you say when someone says that's a very unique, pedophilia is a very unique attraction and that it's not curable and that it's like really addictive? What do you say to that? That's always been my struggle. Is how can I be the only one knowing what I've read about pedophilia, knowing how powerful of a thing that is? So what would you say?

Sterling:

Well, you've obviously done more research on this than I have. After this happened with you, I was just horrified at what I had

done. I was just horrified because I've never done anything like that before. So I guess and again, I'm being as honest as I can, I've never considered myself a pedophile. That one instance was so horrifying to me and I've carried the awareness of that. Not to the degree, you have for sure but I've carried the awareness of that. So I've always had some anxiety about it, anxiety and question in my own mind. Is that something that was deeply rooted in me?

Sterling:

[00:12:48](#)

So I've always been cautious about it. I've probably been cautious with my own kids and cautious with my grandkids because I just don't want anything like that to happen again. But would I consider myself a pedophile? I've never thought of myself in that way. I certainly thought of myself as being sexually addicted for sure.

Have you ever thought...the affairs that you had was any of them with men?

Sterling:

A couple were.

So that's makes a little more sense.

Sterling:

Yeah, a couple were. **But again they were-**

No, what I'm saying is I'm trying to understand, your honesty is helping me a lot. I'm trying to understand why me, a boy and now what you're saying makes a little bit more sense. **By the way, what you said about the affairs, that was what that was related to.**

Sterling:

Okay.

So it just makes me feel good to know that you're being honest with me, **I appreciate that.**

Sterling:

If I had to put a label on it, I guess the label I would put on it is bisexual rather than pedophile.

Okay, yeah. I was 10 I think but I don't proclaim to be ... You are just basically saying it was a deep dark moment for you. Well, and I need to get to this other question because the other question is really something that's been on my heart for as long as I can remember. Let me just ... I don't want to skip ahead here too much.

Sterling:

Sure.

[00:14:30](#)

Okay, so what counseling have you received? How much counseling and is it an ongoing thing, like sexual counseling? Or is it more like counseling just for depression? What's your status around all that?

Sterling:

I've worked over the years, over the last 25 years.

Yeah.

Sterling:

Yeah, I've worked with a number of counselors and I've worked with two specifically about the sexual addiction. One when we were living in Florida and one back here. The others have largely been about the roots of the depression **and the anxiety**. But yes, I've worked specifically with two counselors.

Did any of them think it was ... Did any of them classify a 10-year-old boy as different than just like a male attraction? Did any of them classify that as more like a pedophilia attraction?

Sterling:

Not that I remember.

Okay.

Sterling:

Not that I remember. I remember the counselor in Florida a couple of the same questions that you're asking. Like do you still feel an attraction to boys or to younger kids **or whatever**? No.

Okay. So the counseling, is that something that you have to keep doing throughout your whole life or is that something that you kind of graduate from? I'm just curious.

Sterling:

Well, this is just an opinion but I still struggle with the depression. I'm still wrestling with that, in fact, I just went through a drug treatment here in July that was not very helpful. So the conclusion I'm sort of come to is that it's going to be with me for the rest of my life. It's going to be like managing the depression and managing the pain.

So when I say the sexual stuff, is the sexual stuff associated with the depression? Is that-

Sterling:

It was yeah, it was. But I've been in the last I don't know maybe five or six years, I've been able to separate that connection. So it

no longer ... When I get depressed, I no longer look for ways to act out either through pornography or attraction to women or other men. So that connection I think it's been broken. Do I still worry about that? Yes, I still worry about that.

00:17:04

Okay.

Sterling:

██████████ and I talk about that a lot and she's been amazing through all of this. She's really-

Does she know about the affairs?

Sterling:

She does, yeah.

Okay.

Sterling:

She knows about that and we've...through with counseling and we've wrestled through that and struggled through that.

Okay.

Sterling:

We love each other deeply and frankly, it's a miracle that she stayed with me through all of this.

Yeah, she's an angel, I know about her. Let's see, do you remember did you and ██████████ allow other kids to sleep at your house after that happened to me? Did you guys kind of draw a hard line and say no friends are allowed to sleep over?

Sterling:

I don't remember specifically, I don't remember any sleepovers after that. I think ██████████ may have drawn the line and said that it's not going to go there. She's not going to risk it.

My understanding is that the sexual abuse was reported to your stake president by ██████████ ██████████. My dad had called ██████████ and told him what had happened. Then ██████████ basically said he had a relationship with the stake president. That he would report to the stake president. So when you got called into the stake president, you just basically told them what you had done to me? Obviously, you told them what you had done to me. Then what was the punishment? ██████████ had said you ... What was it, two years of disfellowship?

Sterling:

I was disfellowshipped for two years, yeah.

Okay.

Sterling:

00:18:58

Yeah.

Do you think that was lenient on you or do you-

Sterling:

Well, I have no way to judge, I just don't know how to judge that. I told the stake president that I was prepared to go through whatever they thought was necessary. I just sort of let the process take its own.

Why do you think that my parents were never ... You went through one of those church courts. Why do you think my parents were never contacted to hear their side of the story?

Sterling:

I don't know, that's a good question. I just don't know what the process of the church court was.

Okay. They never talked to my parents and they never talked to me. Let me see.

Sterling:

Well, that surprises me a little bit, I don't know that and that surprises me a little. I didn't know if you may know that I also after talking to the stake president, he said, "Look, this has got to be reported to the police." I said, "Well, I'll go down and report it to the police." So I went, I called and got a detective and went down to the Salt Lake City Police Department and reported it to a detective. He took notes.

Really?

Sterling:

Yeah.

Then where did he go with that from there? What's weird about that is my mom and dad...because I've always ... Back then I was 10, I didn't really have a voice, I didn't really have-

Sterling:

Sure.

I wasn't really involved in any of it. But you always wonder like what came of that. My parents, they said that the police never contacted them, never talked to any police. They said the church never contacted them. Then they said if Sterling had done what you just said he had done, that they would've just arrested you on the spot for child sex abuse. They don't need approval to charge that. If someone goes to the police and says I did such and such to a child, according to my parents, they just

arrest you on the spot. Bang. Even if my parents said no, no, no, don't press charges, it doesn't matter. Once they know that, by law, they have to.

Sterling:

[00:21:24](#)

Yeah, I don't know if the laws were the same 25 years ago as they are now. I understand that now. What came back to me and I don't remember how it came back to me. But was that your parents had said we're not going to press charges. So I assumed, maybe wrongly, but I assumed from that that they had been contacted by the police detective. Had said that we're not going to pursue this. But again, I don't know that for sure, I just don't that.

■

Okay. I talked to ■ because I wanted to know why was I ... See I was curious all these years. It's interesting, I assumed that the church had given you lots of counseling and lots of support. Then I was wondering all these years why they didn't give you lots of counseling and support now?

Sterling:

Well, no I certainly didn't. No, I didn't get any counseling from the church, it was all about the disciplinary council.

■

Correct.

Sterling:

So no, I didn't get any counseling from the church. We figured out that I was going to go to an outside counselor to work through this.

■

Which you did on your own?

Sterling:

Yeah, which I did on my own.

■

Okay.

Sterling:

So no, I didn't get any counseling.

■

Yeah, because I'm wondering all these years because you grow up with these issues. Then I'm wondering and my parents are like, gosh, we've never been through anything like that, we didn't know what to do.

Sterling:

Sure.

■

Now, it's become so prevalent and out in the open that you need counseling. I've always thought if the church knew that you had done that to me and you did tell them that you'd done

that to me, then why would the church not have reached out to me? Then I come to find out from [REDACTED] that the stake president, his name was Harold Brown. He said that he was a psychologist and the head of the entire church social service program. So I'm sitting there thinking to myself why did they not-

Sterling:

[00:23:29](#)

It's kind of a no-brainer actually.

[REDACTED]

Why did they not offer support for me? Where was there absolutely no concern for my welfare when you told them what you'd done? Why was there no zero concern for a 10-year-old boy?

Sterling:

Well, I'd like to know the answer to that question as well. He was I know-

[REDACTED]

But you were forthright when you talked in that court, you told him?

Sterling:

Totally.

[REDACTED]

Yeah, okay.

Sterling:

Yeah, totally.

[REDACTED]

Okay. That's what made me wonder, was he forthright because nobody ever reached out to me or my parents.

Sterling:

I don't lie very well.

[REDACTED]

Okay.

Sterling:

I don't and I remember that church court vividly. I was totally candid about it and said, "Look, I'm willing to take whatever punishment you want me to have on this."

[REDACTED]

I sense that about you, you've been very accommodating for me. I appreciate it.

Sterling:

I would so like to see you get beyond this or get as far past as you can.

[REDACTED]

You already answered the question I had about the police, you already answered that. This one's bothered me too because I wondered all these years, do the kids know now? The kids have

grown up, the kids are all grown up. I'm sorry [REDACTED] by about the way.

Sterling:

Thanks.

00:24:54

That was horrible. But I've always wondered why have the kids not been told about this so that they can have preventive measures around the grandchildren and sleepovers and stuff like that?

Sterling:

Yeah. Well, to be honest with you, it never occurred to me or to [REDACTED] that we should bring the kids into this and then talk with them about this. I wasn't feeling any attraction or pull to the grandkids or to my own kids. So in terms of like I said I worried about this because I carry this with me. But it just frankly never occurred to us that it was important to bring the kids in this, it just never occurred to us.

I wonder if-

Sterling:

Obviously, I like to leave this as far as behind as I possibly can.

I wonder if it occurred to [REDACTED] but it was just too hard to go there?

Sterling:

Yeah, you'd have to ask her, that's possible.

Yeah. But I can ... It is a hard thing. Have you had grandkids over to sleepover?

Sterling:

Yeah. They have been fine, yeah.

It's one of those questions I've always wondered, I'm just going to ask it. How would you have felt if the same had happened to your 10-year-old son at a sleepover?

Sterling:

Well, we actually had an incidence in [REDACTED]'s family. I don't know if she talked to you about this. Where one of her [REDACTED] actually one of [REDACTED]'s children molested [REDACTED].

Okay.

Sterling:

So we with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] we worked through that with [REDACTED] with [REDACTED] But I would've felt awful, of course, I would've felt terrible. But the first concern I have to tell you

from my point of view would've been on that child. That would've been the first concern.

■

Yeah. Also, concern that it could be happening to other

Sterling:

people? Sure.

■

Okay.

Sterling:

Yeah, we've wondered that about ■ we've wondered there are other instances? He is in his ■ f now and we've wondered the same thing that you've wondered.

■

Yeah, you've wondered like I have wondered.

Sterling:

Yeah, we have. We've wondered if that still a problem with him. So yeah, of course, in a situation like that you wonder about the perpetrator. You really wonder about the victim for sure.

■

00:26:41

This is a hard one. I've got a son that's my age when this happened to me. My son's about the same age that I was when that happened to me. So it just causes a lot of emotion when I think about him. When I look at him, he looks like me. So when I look at him, it's like looking at a 10-year-old picture of myself.

Sterling:

That's got to be a confusing experience too given what you're carrying.

■

Yeah. This is a hard one. Hadn't I not gotten up and rushed to the bathroom and locked myself in the bathroom, what was your intention for me? Do you remember where your mind was going?

Sterling:

Yeah, I do. I actually don't remember you getting up and going into the bathroom, I don't remember that. I remember specifically being so ... I should've came to myself. I came to my senses and I remember being so horrified at what I was doing. That I just left and went back upstairs. I didn't actually know that you had gone into the bathroom. ■ told me and ■ that you'd spent the night there. That's just horrendous to me.

■

Let me tell you what I remember. I remember you coming over and doing that to me. Then I woke up and saw you doing that to me and then I could see what you were doing and I was frozen. You were reaching up over the top of me. So then I started to

stir almost like okay, I'm going to pretend like I'm waking up. So I started to stir and then you stopped. Then I just laid there frozen and then you came back again. If I remember correctly, it was the third time that you came over and started doing that. Then I jumped up and looked at you. You froze and you were standing in the back of the room and you had a remote control in one of your hands. You were looking at a TV with like black and white movie. There was no sound on it at all. So you almost like you stood there, froze and kind of pretended you were watching a movie with no sound on. Then I ran into the bathroom.

[00:29:13](#)

When I was in the bathroom, you came to the door, probably three or four different times.

Sterling:

My gosh, I don't remember that.

Yeah, and were trying to coax me out of the bathroom. You were saying, "Are you okay? Come on out." I wouldn't come out and I just kept saying that I felt really sick. Then after probably three or four different times, you tried to coax me out, then I think once you realized I wasn't coming out is when you finally maybe went back upstairs, whatever it was. So that's what I recall distinctly.

Sterling:

Well, I'm sure your memory is more accurate although than mine is.

Okay.

Sterling:

Yeah, I'm sure [inaudible].

So I've always thought my whole life if I don't jump up and go to the bathroom, where's that? Where are we going with that? Where's that headed? The reason I wonder that Sterling, is because I feel like that was a smart thing for me to do. Was to run and lock myself in that bathroom. I think what if I was a lesser person, what if I was a more timid person, where was that going? You follow where my logic?

Sterling:

Yeah, I follow your logic and I've never followed that through in my own head and I've just had.

Yeah, you probably want to, yeah.

Sterling:

Yeah. I just, I don't know-

■

I'm sorry to make you go there.

Sterling:

00:30:43

You have nothing to be sorry for, ■. You have nothing to apologize for.

■

I feel bad because I don't want to make you feel ... I don't want to make you say this is what I was going to do to you. But as a victim, I don't know if it's normal but I've always wondered where were we going to? Where were we going? Where was this headed? How bad would this have progressed to if I hadn't gotten out of there? Yeah, so okay. Then you've already answered a lot of these questions that I have. So when you say that sometimes the depression leads to sexual things and that was the only time that ever led to a sexual attraction to children? Had you ever viewed child pornography?

Sterling:

No, I viewed male pornography and female pornography but not child pornography. No, it just hasn't been a thing for me.

■

Okay. Again, I wrote here. How can I know you're telling the truth? You got caught, you were required to report to the church authorities. You didn't just voluntarily report yourself. My parents asked ■ to report it directly to the stake president who he had relationship with. You were called in by the stake president, right? So there's a big difference for me between turning oneself in and confession so to speak and being caught. So the basis of that question again is-

Sterling:

Well, I actually think and my memory's fuzzy on this. But I think I had had a conversation with ■ I think ■ called me at some point. I could be fuzzy about this and just told me that he was going to tell the stake president. That your dad had talked to him and he was going to talk to the stake president. So I thought, okay, there it is. This happened very quickly. This is within a day or two of what I did. So it happened very quickly. I didn't have a long time to ruminate about this or think about. It happened pretty fast.

■

I see. You already answered that one. You already answered that one. Did you report your affairs to the church authorities?

Sterling:

I did. You mean subsequently? You mean later after that?

■

Affairs that you had, had you always gone and reported those too?

Sterling:

00:33:35

No, I haven't always.

[REDACTED]

I see.

Sterling:

I haven't always. I've been past the acting out as I said for a while now. I had a long conversation with the bishop. This has been, I don't know, six or seven years ago. I told him I was in counseling and [REDACTED] was there and we were getting past it. So no church action was taken.

[REDACTED]

So you didn't have to go through a court or anything?

Sterling:

I didn't have to go through a court again, yeah.

[REDACTED]

For the affairs?

Sterling:

Yeah.

[REDACTED]

How do they do that? I would think that if you report an affair, they would again church court, discipline.

Sterling:

Again, I'm not entirely sure how all that works but I know-

[REDACTED]

Okay.

Sterling:

I'm just not sure how decisions get made or why they get made the way they do.

[REDACTED]

Okay.

Sterling:

I know there is a ... I do know this for sure that there is a push to see church courts, not as courts of punishment. But rather as ... They call them disciplinary councils, not church courts. The idea is not just to punish a perpetrator unless it's illegal and it's totally that you only have to report to the police. They do that. But beyond that, it's more of an attempt to be helpful to bring somebody in line with our covenants.

[REDACTED]

I understand, okay.

Sterling:

Yeah. We really try to get away with the idea that it's a court of punishment.

[REDACTED]

So mine is the only church court that you've ever had to?

Sterling:

00:35:19

It's the only one.

Okay. How many affairs do you think you've had?

Sterling:

I don't know, maybe three or four.

Okay.

Sterling:

But those were a long time ago.

I see.

Sterling:

Those were a long time ago.

You said something was as recent as five, six years ago.

Sterling:

The last time I had an affair with anybody, it was when we were living in Florida, which would've been about 2004.

Okay.

Sterling:

Yeah, so it's been a long time.

Okay. You must have said something else about five, six years ago.

Sterling:

Five or six years ago is when I felt like with the therapy I was seeing, that I was able to make a break.

From the-

Sterling:

Between the depression and the anxiety and the sexual acting out.

I heard from someone that you're currently filming the Temple videos, the endowment videos?

Sterling:

No.

You're not?

Sterling:

I'm not.

Okay. I thought that was ... But then again, which is fine unless there have been stuff that you hadn't report, then I'd wonder

why would be doing that if there's things that had gone unreported or-

Sterling:

[00:36:27](#)

Sure, yeah, it's a fair question.

Yeah. Did you have any sexual interactions with any of the collegiate students that you've had as a teacher and a professor?

Sterling:

No.

Okay.

Sterling:

Never have.

So this question kind of was answered for me too. Yeah, it really was. It was when there was an interview where you were asked about Harvey Weinstein. Then you said, about his first accusers and you said, I guarantee is only the tip of the iceberg. That kind of stuff is very ... Sexual abuse is commonplace in the film industry.

Sterling:

In Hollywood particularly.

Okay.

Sterling:

Yeah, I was asked that question in an interview in South Korea last year.

Yeah. Then when I read that I was like-

Sterling:

You've done your research for sure.

Yeah, because I read that and I was like because I just want to know who Sterling Van Wagenen is.

Sterling:

Sure.

Then I read that and I was like it's just ... Again, as a victim, you can't help but wonder if there's other people out there that are hiding and they're quiet. They're too scared that they think people won't believe them. So I've always wondered that same thing.

Sterling:

Well, there are certainly a lot of instances in the last year or two where that's been the case.

[00:37:47](#)

That's what I mean.

Sterling:

Where people have come forward when they were silent for years, for decades in some cases.

Sterling, when something like this has happened to you and I don't know if you can relate to this on another level. But when something like this has happened to you, you form a very strong emotional connection with it. So for whatever reason, I got a lot of people come to me and tell me they were sexually abused as children. Then I have that commonality with them and because it's just a very prevalent problem. Then also news media, every time I see it.

Sterling:

Totally the news, yeah.

But I don't think I read it like a normal person, I don't. I read it and then I think it makes me wonder, it makes me stir and wonder-

Sterling:

Well, it makes me stir and wonder too because again, I still carry the memory of that with me. So when I read it, I think boy, you know what? I did that. I still feel the prick of that for sure. Yeah.

So then I've always wondered if I was just the tip of the iceberg. If I was the tip of the iceberg, right?

Sterling:

No, you're not.

Yeah. Those are ... I got through that pretty fast. Yeah, those are all the questions that have been on my mind and really on my mind all these years. That's it.

Sterling:

What else can I do to help you through this?

I don't know.

Sterling:

██████ told me that you and ██████ decided to leave the church a while back.

Yeah, four, five months ago.

Sterling:

I'm wondering how much this had to do with that decision.

00:39:54

I don't know that I can answer that. I don't know what that part might have played but ultimately, I wouldn't put that on you. If that's what you're kind of wondering, I wouldn't put that on you. In terms of I have been very suspicious of priesthood leaders my whole life ever since that happened to me. Only because I was told that you were this BYU professor, LDS filmmaker, gospel doctrine teacher. So for me, it just kind of it killed my trust in the priesthood.

Sterling:

Sure, understandably. Yeah, understandably.

So is that the main reason that we ... We decided to leave the church because we no longer believe in it. For a while there, for probably the last five, six years I haven't felt right in it. I read the CES letter, which you're probably familiar with, I read that in 2013, when it came out. Just kind of the time I felt like my conversion was so strong, I just read it. I kind of thought, I will just kind of shelf all of that, it's okay, I still have a testimony. But then for five, six years there, I felt mentally checked out. A lot of the social and administrative issues that I've seen the church mishandled. Social-cultural issues that I've seen the church ... I would say none of that has anything to do with you. Other than I have been very suspicious.

When people talk about a bishop, I can't help but say that bishop's a man. Just a man.

Sterling:

Yeah, he is.

When people talk about those you call them the 12 and those general authorities, I can't help but say but they're just men. They have all the same weaknesses as any other man. We put them up on some mortal platform. So I've always felt like that and I think that is in large part because of what happened to me a kid. But with that all said, [REDACTED] came to me and she just said, "[REDACTED] I feel like I haven't ..." She was very, very loyal, very staunch LDS. Always studying the scriptures, always. Which is [inaudible 00:46:16] kind of person would go beg for callings and listen to General Conference talks everyday all day. She came to me and just said, "[REDACTED] I feel like I haven't been progressing within spiritually, within the Mormon Church for a very long time." Which is a shock to me. Then she said, "I've been listening to Mormon stories, John Dehlin.

Sterling:

John Dehlin."

She said, "I started listening to those because I was kind of intrigued by because there was a lot of ... There are a lot of these people that were having struggles with the church. They also still believed it." So she thought it was like safe story. She's like, "I was listening to people, they have issues, but they have concerns, but they're still very faithful. They're not just antagonistic people against the church." Then she said, "Then I started listening to those stories." She just comes to me and says, "I don't believe it anymore." Then I said, I just I didn't even respond. I was just like-

Sterling:

Surprised and shocked you.

Absolute shock. Like I said, I was mentally checked out for probably five or six years. But I just kind of came to determination on my own privately that I'm just going to have to suck it up. Then I'm just going to have to keep going. So when she said I don't believe it anymore and I don't want to be Mormon anymore. [REDACTED] is kind of that way, she's cool that way. If she decides to do something even if everybody could say that's not a good idea or you're crazy. She pretty true to her own colors.

So then I started looking more seriously at some of the concerns and for me, it was just ... If you've ever seen, you're a movie guy. So if you've ever seen the Truman movie-

Sterling:

Yeah.

Truman Show, is it?

Sterling:

Sure, the Truman Show.

He's running around like am I crazy? He's running around all over town and he's kind of starting to pick up on little things. Wait a minute, I saw something there. What's everybody not telling me? Then at the end of the movie, you see when he goes down that boat and then they try to hit him with a storm. He hits that wall and then he's like you just kind of sees that look in his eyes. Son of a gun. That's how I feel. My whole family is still active and I'm the only one. But that's how I feel, it's like I felt like wait a minute.

Not that everybody else knows because I think my parents believe it still. But just kind of like wait a minute, there's a whole

lot of stuff people haven't been telling me. A lot of stuff hidden, a lot of stuff twisted. I was like that's how you feel when you're in my position. I don't know if you've ever talked ... You probably have talked to a lot of other people that have left the church. I don't know if you've had kids that have left the church.

Sterling:

Our son, [REDACTED] has left the church, yeah.

[REDACTED]

Once you get on that side and you look back at it and then, of course, you still acknowledge it. Majority of Mormon people are good people.

Sterling:

They are, yeah.

[REDACTED]

Yes. But then you go like my dad said to me, "[REDACTED] there is some geniuses in the church. You've got genius professors and doctors and surgeons." He goes, "[REDACTED] surely if everything that you're learning and reading if that was accurate, surely these geniuses, they would concur with you, they would route it out." I sit there and I say, "Dad, not a fair statement." I said, "How many geniuses are there outside of the Mormon church?" If there's only like 3.5 million active true blue Mormons, how many really smart people are there outside of the church looking at all of the church members, just going are you guys crazy? None of that lines up. Archaeologically, scientifically, and historically.

[REDACTED]

So I just want to tell you for me, I told [REDACTED] this. For me, to tell my family that I'm not going to be Mormon anymore-

Sterling:

That was a tough, you don't want that.

[REDACTED]

I'm just telling you, it was like major because my dad's most favorite thing to say and I think I've probably had him say this on probably a thousand occasions. Is and you know he's a successful guy, he's a smart guy. He said on thousands of occasions, "Look, there's Joseph and Jesus." He said, "My most proud accomplishment is that all of my kids and my grandkids that they're all in white, they all have temple recommends. They're all sealed, they're all active." So for me, to know that that's not been told once or twice, that's-

Sterling:

That's painful for sure.

[REDACTED]

He didn't say it to hurt me or to prevent me from leaving, he really meant it. Sincerely, that's his most proud

accomplishment. For me to be the demise of that? I would say, me maybe more so than even most of my brothers and sisters, is I want to please my mom and dad. I want to please them. This is like one of them. This is probably the first time in my life I just gone against the grain. This is significant. So usually I do what they want of me, I want to be that good son.

So I told [REDACTED] that part of this for me, is mom and dad have continually told me that the church handled it. Back then, it was that's what was appropriate. It was appropriate to turn to the church, that's kind of what you did. I know because I've done a lot of reading and so forth and with Sam Young and all these testimonials of bishops abusing little kids and all that stuff. I know that back in that day and age, you were actually encouraged not to go to the police, to go to the bishop. Bishop is the one who handles everything. So cultural then that was really wrong in my opinion.

Sterling:

Yeah, for sure. Obviously, I didn't feel like I could reach out to you obviously. I just assumed that somehow you were going to be taken care of and that obviously, that didn't happen.

I don't put that on you but the things I've learned about the church, the things that they have hidden, it's made me question everything. It's made me wonder, wait a minute. Wait a gosh-darn minute here. Did they take proper measures?

Sterling:

00:41:08

Let me say this to you too. Given the fact that I've had this over here in my emotional, psychological life and the church has been over here. I've struggled all my life to try and get those two sides together for me. As I sit here in 2018, it's a mystery to me but the gospel has never worked for me.

Okay.

Sterling:

It's never worked for me in terms of getting those sides together. The only thing I hold on to is the atonement, it's the belief that somewhere, somehow this is all going to be healed, it's all going to be right. I don't necessarily believe it's going to happen in this life. I wish it would for your sake and for my sake both. But that's the thing I hold on to, that's the only thing I really hold on to, is the atonement. The church, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't work but it's never really worked for me. I'm sure have tried to make it work for sure.

00:41:58

What do you mean it hasn't worked, what is that mean? I know you're saying about the atonement and I get that.

Sterling:

Yeah, what I mean is I've never been healed. In the sense that I've never been healed from the depression or from the anxiety. I've struggled with that like I said since I was in elementary school. It's a thing that's just taken my life off track, created the kind of problems that I've made for you. [REDACTED] and I have gone through this so many times and I've prayed, and I prayed. I've said, how long do I have to endure this? How long does this go on? I prayed to die so many times, it's just I can't even tell you.

Boy.

Sterling:

I look at other people in the church and they seem to be doing just fine. I know everybody has problems and everybody has struggles. It's just a mystery to me that somehow those promises that the Gospel will work for you will heal you. It's just a mystery to me that it's never worked for me. It's just never worked.

Right.

Sterling:

That's why the only thing I really can hold on to is the atonement. That's the only thing that keeps me sane.

I think I know what you mean by saying it never really worked. Even as a kid, maybe it's something inside you inherent. Something inside me inherently, I just always thought like why do I have to go to church? Then I would think, I'd say it to my brother and then he would say, '[REDACTED] you're just rough and you just want to out and play in the outside all the time. You need to give that time to God. You need to give that time to God, that's God's time.' Then they will kind of harsh me that way. But even in my early teens, I just be like, why do we have to report to men, they're just men?

Sterling:

Why do they have to get between us and God?

Yes. So it's funny when I left the faith, the first person I could only think to call, a mentor of mine, close friend in my business. I couldn't tell my parents at that time. I called him and he was raised Mormon but he stopped going to the Mormon church when he was like 12 on his own.

Sterling:

██████████

Really?

Yeah. I just know he's a very spiritual person. I always said that even as a kid. There's a difference between religion and spirituality, there's got to be a difference because there's too many two-faced people. So then I called him and I told him and he goes, "Okay." He said, "Well, ██████████." He goes, "When I was 12 years old, I decided that I no longer had to report to a man in order to get to God." Then I said, "You were 12?" He goes, "Yeah." Then he goes, "Not only that." He said, "I also decided that I didn't need to go to a building in order to worship God. I could worship God anywhere I was, anytime I wanted." When he said this to me, I respect him, he's a very spiritual person. He's just a wonder, he's the most generous person I've ever met in my life. When he said that, I thought man. It was like my heart just sunk. I thought that's the most easy thing to say. You don't have to report to a man, you don't have to report to a building. But that is two things that our church does not want anyone saying that.

██████████

Fundamentally, that just rules out religion all together. But for me, it's like my heart just sunk. Then when you leave the church, Sterling, you pretty much every day tumbles. When you talk about the atonement, when you don't believe in Joseph Smith anymore and you don't believe in this modern day prophets and apostles, then everything starts to crumble. So my wife had a full-blown anxiety attack, I've never seen her like this. She couldn't function for like three or four days, she couldn't breathe. She was just begging me to take her to the hospital. She said, "If none of that is true, then how do I know there's a God? If there's not a God, how can I go on living?"

Sterling:

██████████

Boy, it got really basic.

But it was crazy because the same person that I called, the same person that told me ██████████ said, "Well, do you believe in God?" Then he said, "Yeah." She said, "You do?" He says, "Yeah, absolutely." He says, "I've studied science and research and history." He's really a genius. He's probably about I bet his 67 now. He goes, "Man." He goes, "Yes." He goes, "I know there's a God." Then ██████████ just you just see a big smile on her face. She said ... As if he has there's permission, ██████████. But really she just needed to hear that from someone that she loves and admires and respects.

Sterling:



Sterling:



Sterling:



00:43:09



Sterling:



Sterling:



Sterling:



Sure.

When you talk about the atonement-

The atonement is not unique to the Mormon Church.

Absolutely not, no.

It's not.

Absolutely not. So right now, I would say that I'm a mixed bag. I've been turned upside down and inside out and shook all up.

But I always wondered when people, Sterling just being honest with you. I always wondered how when people would get up and cry and say Christ atonement, they're balling. Then they would say I know. Then I would look at them, not that I'm a cynic but I would kind of sit there and think listen.

How I feel now is I really didn't know Joseph Smith and truth be told nobody in the church knows him. They don't know him. They think they do. We make movies about him and we think we know him, we don't know him. There's a lot written about him and a lot in journals. There's a lot of things he did that nobody is aware of. Part of the reasons is because the Mormon Church has hidden it and they disallow us from seeing that information. But they want us to see him as they want us to see him. I know so much about him now.

The churches has apologized.

Yes.

Sure.

Truth be told, Brigham Young is more so responsible for the success of the church, for the proliferation and what's become far more than Joseph. People that know Joseph's character and how he was and how self-destructive he could be, they've often said had he not been martyred that he would've run the church into the ground.

Yeah, probably true.

But when I sit there, when I hear people say that about Jesus. I would sit there and I think, they don't know Jesus. I didn't even

know Joseph Smith and yet that was only what? 200 years ago? For me to say I know Joseph, I know what they mean intrinsically what they're referring to. But there again, it just I'm starting to learn to be more of an objective thinker. We know about Jesus, what they want us to know, what the Roman Catholic church wanted us to know, the governing bodies wanted us to know. They're so ... I'm even just coming to learn that there's so much we don't know.

But I understand in terms of-

Sterling:

That's a good place to be I think.

[00:44:54](#)

In terms of the atonement, I understand what the atonement is supposed to mean, I understand all of that. I can see how people would want to connect so badly with that. Especially if they felt like they're not whole.

Sterling:

Yeah.

I get it. At one, I get all of that. But I'm just talking. I'm just talking to you because I don't get to talk a lot about this. Mormon people, I can't talk to my mom and dad like this. I can't because then they view you as apostate, they view you as someone that's going to try to drag them down. You can't just be honest about any doubts. I believe in Jesus, I still do. I do but I just have all these questions now.

Sterling:

It's good thing.

But it felt like before I was not allowed to have-

Sterling:

Yeah, that's a good thing. I was working on a film a few years ago. I was working with a Baptist minister and he was killed in an automobile accident. We talked to several people who were witness to this. He was pronounced dead in the car and he wrote a book called 90 Minutes in Heaven. He went to the other side and then they pulled him out and they were able to revive him. But he's got this detailed account of what he saw on the other side, believe it or not.

Sterling:

But he said something to me that was really meaningful. I asked him. I said, "Okay, look, you were a minister before you were killed in this accident and you believed in God. You were brought back after spending this time in what Mormons would call spirit world. What's the difference between your idea of

God before and after?" He said, "I can just tell you in word and that is 'bigger'."

Bigger.

Sterling:

Just bigger, yeah. I've never forgotten that and I thought we just try to shrink things down to the point where we're comfortable with them. I just think the universe is so much more complex, so much bigger. I think it's wonderful that you're asking these hard questions. My gosh, this is-

00:45:12

They're hard questions. I forgot a question that I wanted to ask you. What church callings have you had over the years? I've wondered that too.

Sterling:

Gospel Doctrine Teacher, I've had when we were in Florida, I was on high counsel for three years. I'm currently the Ward Employment Specialist. So I'm-

Helping people get jobs.

Sterling:

Yeah, helping people get jobs. But I've never had like a big calling like a bishop or a counselor-

High counsel is a big calling.

Sterling:

Yeah, I think they were desperate in Florida for people. But that's the most I've ever had. I haven't had a desire to be seen as somebody who has big church calling. That's just never been important to me.

No notoriety around that?

Sterling:

No notoriety around it, it's still isn't.

So obviously, what you're telling me about you've never been attracted to ... One of my questions was always if you had callings around children?

Sterling:

No, never had a calling around children.

As I was going to ask you one more thing about that. Let me think. Yeah, it was just the callings and then I think that was it. ■ said that you were doing the Temple videos.

Sterling:

Did he?

00:46:24

Yeah. When I talked to [REDACTED] he said that you were working on Temple videos.

Sterling:

How long did you talk to him?

Two days ago. I just wanted to ask him because I was unclear about how that happened with the stake president getting involved. So I said, "[REDACTED] my parents were never contacted by the church, we never got to share their side of the story." [REDACTED] just in passing said that you were working on the Temple videos.

Sterling:

Did he respond to your point about the church never contacting your parents? Did he talk about that at all?

He just kept saying, I have full faith in-

Sterling:

Harold Brown?

Harold Brown. He said, "I have full faith in Harold Brown and I turned it over to Harold. Reported it." Then that's what he said. He said, "I don't know what came of it." He said, "I don't know what came of it." He said, "I wasn't involved in that church court." So he just kind of make seem like he just got the information from my dad. He was told in turn to report it, which he did to Harold Brown. That was pretty much it.

But then he did say in passing that ... I said I want to make sure that there's no other victims and that Sterling isn't hurting anybody. Then he said, "Well, I would sure hope not because he's working, right now, he's doing a Temple videos for the church." He said that on two different occasions. He said that his ... So I don't know if that's classified information that you're not allowed to tell people and he shouldn't be telling people. But that's what he told me. I don't know why he would.

Sterling:

It's interesting, I saw [REDACTED] It was right around the time he was getting ready to [REDACTED]

Sterling:

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. We had a meeting and we talked. I remember both saying to each other, I can't remember who said it first. But he

said, "I hope we're both different men than we were back then." He talked about regretting divorcing [REDACTED].

Did he?

[REDACTED]
Sterling:

He did.

I'm surprised to hear that.

[REDACTED]
Sterling:

[00:49:06](#)

Yeah, he said he regretted divorcing [REDACTED] and he said if he had to do it over again, he wouldn't do that. He turned to me and he said, "I hope you are a different man than you were." I said, "Yeah, I am a different man than I was back then." We had kind of a nice moment there for just a second or two.

Right.

[REDACTED]
Sterling:

Yeah.

[REDACTED]
Yeah. Well, that's nice to hear, I love [REDACTED]. I'm crazy about [REDACTED], I'm crazy about the whole [REDACTED] family. I'm crazy about that family and I don't know everything that went down. I was so young but it doesn't really matter now. But it seems like they have all grown, stepped into their new reality. Based on what I see, it just seems as though those kids are so great.

Sterling:

Yeah, they're damn good kids.

[REDACTED]
Your kids, I've talked to your kids and they're so sweet. [REDACTED] kind of says, "Van Wagenen kids have a hard, hard time communicating about things." I wouldn't label that's ... I wouldn't say that's exclusive to Van Wagenen kids-

Sterling:

Hardly.

[REDACTED]
Yeah, I would say there's a lot of people like that but he was just kind of saying it's hard to talk about things. It's hard to talk about different things.

Sterling:

Well, we've sure talked about this situation-

[REDACTED]
Recently.

Sterling:

Yeah, in the last week or 10 days. Yeah, I've had long conversations not with everybody because [REDACTED]'s in Europe. But

I've talked to [REDACTED] about it at great length and [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] not so much because he's been busy.

Good kids, though.

Sterling: [00:50:02](#)

I think they are good kids.

Good people. When I say kids, they're adults now but good people.

Sterling:

Yeah, good people.

Really, I just think the word of all of them. [REDACTED] checked in with me today just to say, "Hey, I hope it goes well."

Sterling:

Yeah, I told [REDACTED] we were going to get together tonight.

Just nice thoughtful people, really thoughtful.

Sterling:

Well, I know they should have an investment in your healing in this.

You know how I'm feeling? Part of me is feeling like that I ask myself, why did this happen to me? [REDACTED] wrote back and [REDACTED] was like, "What?" He's like, "No way." He's like ... Then says, "That dad says this only happened to you, [REDACTED]." Then he said, "Why you, why [REDACTED]? Why the one time, why [REDACTED]?" Then I'm saying to myself, yeah, because I'm a faith-filled person, why me? Why am I that one person? I don't know, I'm just struggling with that. Honestly, I'm-

Sterling:

I wish I had an answer for that one, I really do. But I should've known either.

Part of me says and this is what part of me is saying all along. Is that there's probably other victims out there and I need to be that strong person that makes it okay to come forward.

Sterling:

Sure.

That's part of me that's saying that.

Sterling:

Well, if it helps you to make sense of why this happened, yeah.

The other part of me is saying, maybe well I do think the church really, really probably didn't handle it properly in my opinion.

Maybe I'm supposed to be a voice for that change too, I don't know. I'm out of the church but my whole family is still in the church, all my friends are in the church. So these are two of the things that I'm grappling with the most. Is making sense of why that happened to me.

Sterling:

[00:52:15](#)

Sure, understandably.

Yeah.

Sterling:

Yeah. I've got a couple of things I'm still trying to make sense of too that happened in my childhood. Don't have any easy answers.

Yeah.

Sterling:

Look, if I'm happy to talk with you anytime.

Thank you.

Sterling:

If you have any questions that come and you feel like you need to talk again.

Yeah. I appreciate it, I feel like you've been forthright, which I appreciate. Just the only thing I'm struggling with is I get the affairs, I get what you're telling me and I get the porn and I get all of that. I still struggle with me being the one and only kid ever. That being the only time that you even had feelings or affection or attraction towards-

Sterling:

Sure, I can understand why you continue to be concerned about that. I wish I knew what I can say that will give you some comfort in that, on that front.

Yeah. Well, I appreciate you being honest with me, though. I do, I appreciate you taking the time.

Sterling:

For heaven sakes-

I really do.

Sterling:

Yeah, and again I appreciate your courage in being willing to sit down and going through all of this and ask the hard questions.

Yeah, they're hard, yeah.

Sterling:

I appreciate for your [inaudible].



[00:53:48](#)

Thanks, Sterling.

Sterling:

I appreciate you doing that.



You're right. You need to use the restroom or anything?

Sterling:

No, I'm good.



Okay. All right, my friend. Well, thanks again.

Sterling:

Sounds like you got a good wife too.



Yeah. She's been through a lot and her side of the family. She sure been through a lot. Yeah.

Sterling:

Well, tell her goodbye for me.



I will, Sterling, thanks. You drive safe.

Sterling:

If you ever feel you need to talk again or communicate, please, feel free to do that.



Okay, thank you.