

# Minnesota sex abuse survivor finds healing in new play 'Trust'

A new play opening this week in Minneapolis looks at clergy sex abuse from a victim's perspective.

By Rohan Preston (<http://www.startribune.com/rohan-preston/10645706/>) Star Tribune |

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James Hanson, an actor and religion professor at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., was doing a solo show about the apostle Paul a couple of years ago when he shared a secret with John Woehrle.

Hanson told Woehrle that he had been molested as a teenager by a Lutheran pastor in Moorhead, Minn., where he grew up. The cleric was a family friend.

Woehrle, a playwright, actor, director and teacher who was helping Hanson stage the production, consoled him. He suggested that Hanson share his story in a play.

“While clergy abuse has gotten a lot of press in movies like ‘Spotlight’ and other shows, there hasn’t been a lot from the victims’ perspective,” Hanson said. “I wanted to show the ripple effects of the abuse on the victim, the family, the community at large. It’s corrosive and ugly stuff that took me 17 years to acknowledge, but I’ve gotten to a good place now.”

Thus, “Trust” was seeded.

## Quick journey to stage

The drama, written by Woehrle and premiering Wednesday at the Lab Theater in Minneapolis, has come relatively quickly to the stage.

It was developed in Woehrle’s theater workshop and features some of his acting students. He and Hanson also act in the production, which stirs vivid memories for Hanson.

“For me, the abuse started with confirmation classes in ninth grade and lasted two to three years,” he said. The priest “would keep me afterwards, talk to me, then he took me and another confirmation boy on a trip to Colorado. That’s where the physical abuse began.”

David L. Anderson was pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church of Moorhead from 1973 to 1985, and later a vice president at St. Olaf. In 1992, after more than two dozen accusers came forward, he admitted “sexual misconduct ... over a period of many years” with young men and boys, including parishioners at Trinity. He resigned from the clergy and St. Olaf. He never served jail time and later died of cancer.

Hanson said that, as he looks back on his experience, Anderson had a sick intelligence and a knack for picking his victims, all enhanced by his status as a man of the cloth. In fact, he presided over Hanson’s first marriage.

“Remember, these priests are revered conduits of God,” Hanson said.

Although Anderson was Lutheran, “Trust” takes place at a Catholic college.

“It was never intended to be Jim’s story in any literal sense,” Woehrle said. “The broader stroke was the Catholic church is getting the most attention for this. So, the setting is a fictitious Catholic college in Minnesota.”

## Abuse re-awakened

In “Trust,” the hiring of a college president precipitates a crisis in a student named Michael. The president turns out to be Michael’s abuser.

Hanson said that for all the seriousness of the subject, the play “has some good humor,” he said. “I know it’s strange to think that, but audiences will also laugh.”

The play has the backing of St. Paul attorney Jeff Anderson, an advocate for sex-abuse victims and the show’s executive producer.



clergy sex abuse. (http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows\_14709548578

RICH REMEDIOS

John Woehrle as Father Daniels in “Trust.”

“Any time somebody can get the story told about survival and betrayal by authority figures, I try to be supportive of those efforts,” he said. “Artistically, socially, politically and culturally, we want this very painful message of survival to be better understood.”

“Trust” is directed by Rich Remedios, an actor who was in “Love! Valour! Compassion!” on Broadway. The show marks his directorial debut. He said it’s not something that he sought out, but something that called him.

“John asked me to do it, and I was reluctant at first because I hadn’t directed a full-length play before,” Remedios said. “But now that I’ve done it, it’s clear to me that it’s a calling. This is a story that must be told.”

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✉ [rpreston@startribune.com](mailto:rpreston@startribune.com) 📞 612-673-4390 🐦 [rohanpreston](https://twitter.com/rohanpreston)

## Trust

Who: Written by John Woehrlé. Directed by Rich Remedios.

When: 7:30 p.m. Wed.-Sat., 2 p.m. next Sun.  
Ends Aug. 28.

Where: Lab Theater, 700 N. 1st St., Mpls.

Tickets: \$15-\$25. 612-333-7977, -  
[thelabtheater.org](http://thelabtheater.org).