

Changing Church Culture to Support Sexual Assault Victims - Part 2

Local congregations and people of faith must actively support victims of sexual assault who have come forward as part of the #metoo and #churchtoo movements and provide safe spaces for those who have yet to share their stories.

Here are three big things that have to be in the culture of our churches if we are going to be able to change the outcome of #churchtoo stories and stop so many from happening in the first place.

1. Listen well.

Create a culture of honesty, where victims are believed when they come forward. Believe them, take their stories seriously and support them.

It's authorities' job to investigate and figure out the truth of the situation, not ours. Believe their stories and take them seriously.

This takes valuing the voice of women and girls, valuing the voice of the vulnerable and even valuing the voice of outsiders.

Listen to those, even outsiders, who say our system is broken. They can help us see the things in our church cultures that are unhelpful to victims.

Unfortunately, it often seems in these #churchtoo stories that churches are more concerned with protecting the church and the reputation of leaders than they are concerned about victims.

Our God hears the cries of the oppressed, but it seems churches give the oppressors more attention rather than the oppressed.

Jimmy Hinton, pastor of Somerset Church of Christ in Somerset, Pennsylvania, [put](#) it this way, “They care for, protect and nurture the wolf while the sheep are left out to fend for themselves unaware that a wolf is in the sheep pen eyeing the ewe lambs.”

2. Cultivate compassion for the vulnerable.

There is certainly lots of rich biblical teaching around compassion to be understood and practiced.

I’m also thinking here of really practical things like having policies and practices that make things safer for the vulnerable, including good, up-to-date child abuse response-and-prevention plans (see, for example, [CBAC SafeR Church](#).)

Have a plan on how to respond with compassion when harassment, unwanted attention and abuse are brought to light.

Make sure to include in the plan appropriate responses to care for victims and appropriate consequences for those who mistreat the vulnerable.

Let’s also be sure we’re not teaching that silence is spiritual. Silence is not spiritual. Silence is not compassionate and ends up helping neither the victim nor the abuser in getting needed help. God helps us bring to light that which was hidden in darkness.

Let’s also be careful not to tell victims far too quickly to forgive, or even be reconciled, when it would not be safe or wise to do so. Show compassion.

3. Teach and model respect for all genders and all people.

I do worry what we are teaching this younger generation about what it means to be respectful men, women, boys and girls, with respectful relationships with people of all genders.

Teach and model a theology of personhood, which helps people understand the

depth of reality that every single person is made in the image of God and is, therefore, worthy of our highest respect.

It doesn't matter how messed up, broken, marred by their sin, marred by others' sin, their background or anything else - everyone we meet (in real life and virtually) is created in the image of God and absolutely deserves being treated with sacredness because of that.

Let's start there; it leaves no room for disrespect, for mistreatment or for disbelieving someone's story.

Teach about consent and what it means as a follower of Jesus. Don't just say, "Don't do 'it' until your married;" that's not helpful to anyone and does not give any real tools or language to handle real-life situations.

Teach that your body is precious, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and that you have the absolute right, anytime, anywhere, with anyone, to speak up if something makes you uncomfortable, is inappropriate or simply unwanted.

You have the right to speak up in the situation, after the situation, and years after the situation.

Give boys and girls, men and women, everyone, words for consent - what it means to ask for it, respect it and give it.

Give boys and girls, men and women encouragement to believe their conscious, the Holy Spirit nudges - when something doesn't feel right or makes them feel uncomfortable - to get out and tell someone they trust.

Those are three things that could start to change our church culture around this.

I've also been reflecting on the way of Christ in this.

How would Jesus himself engage the #metoo and #churchtoo movement?

We've got a lot of clues to how he'd react looking at his life as recorded in the

Gospels and watching the compassion with which faithful Christ followers today are compassionately standing with victims.

Notice Jesus' engagement:

- Listening to their heart; Jesus listens to the person, their heart, regardless of their reputation in the world or the language or theology they use in explaining their story or stance. He values the downtrodden and victim. Consider the woman at the well (John 4:1-26). Jesus wasn't tainted by her reputation of having had five husbands and now being with another man. He saw someone needing living water, needing to be listened to and valued.
- Jesus let a woman of questionable character wash his feet (Luke 7:36-50) with her tears, perfume and her hair without letting any of the men and boys around him turn it into anything sexual or seductive.
- Jesus stood with the oppressed, writing in the sand. Meanwhile, those wanting to accuse her and throw stones at her - and defend their stance and their "righteous" accusations of her - slowly walked away as Jesus' compassion trumped their accusations (John 8:1-11).
- Jesus identified with the victim, every victim, when he became a victim of an oppressive, unfair system Himself, being hung on a cross (Mark 15:27-32).
- God will hear the cry of the oppressed and not allow abusers and oppressors get away with it. For example, in Exodus 22:21-23, it says, "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry." Jesus clearly upheld freeing the oppressed, in fact, stating this is part of why he came (Luke 4:18-21), and that when he returns, he'll judge us for what we did not do to look after the hungry, thirsty, poor, oppressed and oppressive systems among us (Matthew 25:31-46).

May things that have been hidden in the darkness be brought to light.

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May we know how to handle that which is brought into the light with Jesus' compassion, Spirit of grace and truth and deep love.

May we know how to love each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series. Part one is available [here](#). A [version](#) of this article first appeared on One Neighborhood, the [blog](#) of Canadian Baptist of Atlantic Canada's Youth and Family Department. It is used with permission.