

Conference Minister's Corner

Why Didn't You Tell Somebody?

Reasons why victims don't come forward . . . and what our conference is doing about it

By Rev. Amy S. Zimbelman



In the last six years, the following have occurred in Mountain States Mennonite Conference: sexual harassment, sexual grooming, gender-based discrimination, gender/pregnancy-based verbal abuse, racist verbal abuse, and financial abuse. Some of this misconduct has targeted me personally, while some of this has happened to others in our conference. All of the perpetrators in the situations I have in mind were people in leadership positions at the time (both clergy and lay).

I wish this were someone else's problem. But it's ours. All of ours.

I'm grateful that I am not currently experiencing mistreatment, but I want to name some of the reasons why survivors don't share about abuse and harassment publicly. In fact, 85% of workers who are harassed never report it.¹ Why is that? What forces are working against survivors (myself included), making it so difficult to name the mistreatment we've endured and to help hold abusers accountable?

I also want to share **four initiatives** our conference is taking to address this problem right now. This is because I genuinely love our conference and my role in it—I have in no way given up on this institution. But this conference's Leadership Board and I, and so many of y'all in the pulpits and pews, are convinced that we can do better—that the same structures, policies, and cultural norms that made my and others' abuse possible can shift to make future abuse almost impossible.

So why is it so hard to talk about this?

Survivors don't come forward because it's not "nice" to accuse someone. Calling out an abuser is an indictment not only on the abuser but also on his/her friends, the church leaders, and perhaps even the conference and denomination for their part in allowing the misconduct to happen. Our peace churches are well-oiled kindness machines, concerned about everyone's feelings. But peace churches can easily become "nice" cultures that confuse a victim seeking justice with that victim unnecessarily rocking the boat, or worse: being harmful and un-peaceful. "Nice" cultures have a foundation of fear. "Nice" cultures sweep painful experiences under the rug, caring more about the church's reputation than how its members are treated. "Nice" cultures are not actually nice.

Survivors don't come forward because they may be doubted/blamed/discredited/retaliated against. Even though false accusations are incredibly rare,² the story of victims may be doubted: "Are you sure you heard him correctly?" A victim may also be blamed or discredited for a host of reasons: how they dress, their pregnancy status ("She's just hormonal"), their past, their race/cultural background ("I just don't know that he's ever fit in with Mennonite culture"), their mental health status, their assertive behavior ("Why did you speak up?—You know he's volatile."), etc.

And after a public accusation is made, there's a real chance a victim will be retaliated against by the abuser or others in the church. For pastors who have experienced abuse, the consequences can be brutal to their careers: if a victim tries to get a job at another church, will the fact that she called out a powerful man at this church work against her? Will her formal complaint show up on her performance review? Will retaliation come in the form of pay reduction, or delaying a paycheck (a.k.a. financial abuse)?

These risks of coming forward have the effect of re-traumatizing the person who has already experienced the church as a site of trauma. Many survivors stay silent because it just doesn't seem worth it.

Initiative 1: This year's virtual [Faith & Life Forum](#) will be addressing the hostile cultures surrounding survivors that I've named above. It's entitled *The Myth of the Perfect Victim: A biblical case for taking survivors seriously*. We'll look at a trauma-informed approach to interpreting biblical stories about sexualized violence and how to support the survivors in our midst. March 26 at 9:30 MST. Register [here](#).



Survivors don't come forward because it's unclear what that even looks like. Because we do not have top-down polity, the structures of our churches can be surprisingly confusing. If there's no HR department to call and no clear anti-harassment/abuse policy verbalized and posted publicly, how does someone—especially someone newer to the congregation—know how to file a complaint?

Survivors don't come forward because of how power works—the structures may not be on their side. As I've [written before](#), the health of our churches is largely dependent on the health of its local leaders (a.k.a. leadership team, congregational chair, elders). Outside leaders like MC USA staff or the Conference Minister have surprisingly little decision-making power in misconduct situations. Therefore, if local leaders have a fair, swift, victim-centered approach when addressing a report of misconduct, they can send a clear message about what behavior is and isn't acceptable in our congregations. But if local leaders are wishy-washy or inclined to uphold “nice” culture, it can be tenuous and even counterproductive for a victim to come forward. In fact, publicly accusing the abuser can instead put the victim's leadership role or career in jeopardy. The victim's reputation may also be indefinitely tarnished by being associated with the abuser's harmful behavior.

Initiative 2: Local leaders are first responders in receiving and addressing misconduct claims, so our conference has developed and is currently offering an online Misconduct Training for Congregational Chairpeople. It covers topics like how to recognize harassment and discrimination, the importance of written policies, reporting procedures, etc. Feel free to ask your congregational chair (a.k.a. lead elder, leadership team chair) if they've taken it yet and encourage them to share what they've learned.

Initiative 3: Because structures greatly influence how misconduct is handled, I've formed a **Think Tank** in our conference to analyze if our conference's bylaws, policies, documents, etc. could better protect marginalized/vulnerable folks in our congregations. The Think Tank consists of leaders with institutional memory who helped write our bylaws to begin with and are equipped to recommend changes to our Leadership Board and delegate body. MC USA is also revamping their misconduct/safe sanctuary policies for the denomination, so improvements should come from multiple angles.

Survivors don't come forward because, at the end of the day, they don't think it will make any difference. One of the best ways to honor a survivor is to take their story seriously when they're ready to tell it, and then act on the information to make things better. Survivors want to know that we're learning from mistakes, not repeating them.

Initiative 4: I've been awarded a **grant to study the experiences of women in ministry** in MC USA settings, asking the question: *What are the experiences of women who have had brief ministries in MC USA settings and the experiences of women who have had long careers in this denomination, and can their stories inform us to better create cultures, policies, and practices where all leaders thrive, regardless of gender?*

My hope is to look nationally at trends through a quantitative survey, and conduct interviews with women in ministry to garner qualitative data. I'm partnering with leaders from MC USA's Women in Leadership ministry, a sociologist at Duke, and others. I hope to share my findings widely.

I envision a Jesus-centered church that embodies peace and justice, where everyone in our pews is treated with respect and care, and where ministers from every background feel drawn to ministry, feel satisfaction in their work, and stay in ministry for the long haul.

The way towards healthier communities belongs to all of us. Please join us for this year's [Faith & Life Forum](#), and if getting more involved in these initiatives sounds interesting to you, let me know: amyz@mountainstatesmc.org.

1 Caitlin Flanagan, "The Problem with HR" *The Atlantic*. July 2019 at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/07/hr-workplace-harrasment-metoo/590644/>

2 According to a UK new source, a man is, by their measure, 230 times more likely to be raped than to be falsely accused of rape.

Georgina Lee, "FactCheck" *4 News*. October 12, 2018 at <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-men-are-more-likely-to-be-raped-than-be-falsely-accused-of-rape>