

# Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies

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Volume 10 | Issue 1

Article 5

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2022

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### Recommended Citation

Metzger, Trudy. 2022. "Sexual Abuse among Conservative Anabaptists: Culture-Specific Dynamics that Increase Risk of Victimization and Silencing of Victims." *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 10(1):41-56.

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# **Sexual Abuse among Conservative Anabaptists: Culture-Specific Dynamics that Increase Risk of Victimization and Silencing of Victims**

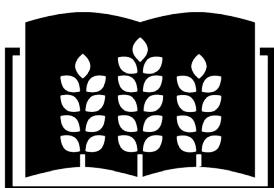
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**Abstract:** How do biblical beliefs and religious-cultural teachings influence a theology of silence among conservative Anabaptists? This research explores this opening question through qualitative research, by examining the impact of theology on expectations of silence among victims of sexual abuse. Conservative Anabaptists are comprised of a range of Mennonite and Amish groups who adhere to deeply fundamental religious beliefs, various forms of separated attire including some type of head covering for women, as well as social isolation and separation from mainstream society to varying degrees. Some even restrict interactions with other conservative Anabaptists whose beliefs differ from their own. Private messages from abuse victims within conservative Anabaptist communities were used to explore how theological and religious teachings contribute to silencing victims of sexual abuse. These messages were sent to Generations Unleashed or to me directly, over the course of 10 years, beginning in November 2010. Contrasting and comparing findings with the work of various professionals offers depth to the research findings. Analyzing patterns, comparing data, and triangulating data gleaned from testimonies of these victims with existing literature gives credibility to findings in the stories and testimonies of survivors. This paper discusses the findings in these survivor testimonies and cultural beliefs and theology, compares them with existing literature, and offers useful insights for professionals who work with conservative Anabaptist survivors of abuse. [Abstract by author.]

**Keywords:** Restorative justice; Conservative Mennonites; Amish; Forgiveness; Family relationships; Theology and abuse; Coercion



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**Recommended citation:** Metzger, Trudy. 2022. "Sexual Abuse among Conservative Anabaptists: Culture-Specific Dynamics that Increase Risk of Victimization and Silencing of Victims." *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 10(1):41-56..

**Publication type:** Original research article (peer reviewed), open access (may be freely distributed). JAPAS is published by the Amish & Plain Anabaptist Studies Association (<http://amishstudies.org>) and the University of Akron.

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual abuse is no longer an obscure problem; it is well documented by professionals and community leaders, and has received much media attention in recent decades (Herman 1997, 30, 40, 51, 212; Wengerd 2017; Hoover and Harder 2019). Religious institutions, which almost universally condemn coercive sexual relations in their creeds and theology, have received particular attention (Bottoms, et al. 1995; Gerdes, Beck and Wilkinson-Sparks 1996; Nielson 2003; Flynn 2008). Media coverage has highlighted discrepancies between what they are assumed to represent and cases of religion-internal abuse (Pauls 2016; Walters 2016; Smith and Bradbury 2019).

Dr. Judith Herman writes that in times of trauma and crisis, it is human nature to cry out for God and our mothers (Herman 1997, 52). When abuse takes place in a religious setting, a setting representing God, or abuse is committed by individuals in religious positions of trust, it is ultimately God who survivors may believe does not care and who disregards their pain. If both fail to respond, and the church and their families also disregard victims, to whom can they turn for help within their culture?

While awareness of abuse continues to grow, shock remains when abuse surfaces in religious settings, including the conservative and plain Anabaptists. As memoirs (Miller 2010; Burkholder 2012; Griffin 2014; Metzger 2015; Beachy 2019) and blogs tell stories of Anabaptist abuse survivors (Detweiler n.d.; Scarella n.d.), we can now acknowledge that sexual abuse is not uncommon. What we do not understand well is how a combination of religious and cultural factors create contexts that may protect or expose the vulnerable to risk of abuse.

Given that little peer reviewed, systematic research exists about abuse in plain Anabaptist contexts—McGuigan and Stephenson's (2015) single person case study is an exception—this milestone article outlines major themes that can establish a research agenda for future investigation. To do this, I share my own narrative for disclosure and reflexivity, offer a review of the literature about abuse in other Christian contexts, and provide corresponding background about the conservative Anabaptists, using a content analysis of religious documents produced by several con-

servative Anabaptist denominations. These background steps inform my qualitative study, which employs a convenience sample of 12 interviewees who experienced abuse in conservative Anabaptist settings. My analyses are organized around six themes addressing how the social-religious contexts of plain Anabaptism could increase vulnerability. However, because of the preliminary nature of this investigation, I discourage readers from interpreting these dynamics as settled. Instead, I offer these as propositions informed by my investigation and, in my conclusion, recommend more research to test and nuance the proposals here.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE AND REFLEXIVITY

Because my autobiography both motivates and informs this study, I open with my narrative as both an exercise in reflexivity and disclosure to readers. I was raised in the conservative Anabaptist culture and have survived violence, death threats, and sexual abuse from within. At the time of my birth, my parents were part of an Old Colony Mennonite settlement in Mexico, where abuse was not only common but largely justified. A father took pride in whipping his grown sons into obedience. Stories of murder, beatings, and domestic violence were everyday conversation, stories my parents told as far back as I can recall. Soon after my birth, my parents transitioned to a closely related but more evangelical Mennonite group, the Kleine Gemeinde, where severe spankings were common and accepted but other abuse and violence were not as common nor discussed as freely.<sup>1</sup>

When I was nine, having moved to Canada several years earlier, our family began attending the Conservative Mennonite Churches of Ontario (CMCO) fellowship, or the “white bonnet” people as we called them. Here, abuse of any kind was almost unheard of. Parents were taught to spank their children lovingly, and hard if necessary, but not to beat them. Sexual abuse was not openly discussed. Because of the silence surrounding abuse in the CMCO group, I thought our family was the only family who feared for our lives, and I was

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<sup>1</sup> Years later, I would learn that, while not as prevalent as among Old Colony, there was a significant abuse problem among the Kleine Gemeinde.

ashamed of the mark it left on us. The rare moment when abuse was acknowledged, it was spoken of in whispers with few details. Of the hundreds of families with whom our churches interacted, I knew of only two other Mennonite families across Ontario who were rumoured to have problems with domestic violence, though not nearly as extreme as our family.

Apart from personal experience, while growing up, I was not aware of sexual abuse and domestic violence among other conservative Anabaptists. In those early years at home, I believed I was the only one in our family who had been sexually violated. It would be years before I learned that some of my 16 siblings were also molested by various offenders, and eventually, I came to learn of the tragic stories of many—easily numbering in the hundreds—of victims in our conservative Anabaptist churches, not only in Ontario but across Canada, the United States, Mexico, and beyond. Only then would I begin to explore the link between abuse and our religious teachings and practices.

Today, as someone from the conservative Anabaptist culture who has survived sexual abuse and other violence within our family and community, and as someone who continues to support hundreds of survivors among them, I know the culture well. It is beautiful. It is gentle and peace-loving. But I see a darker side hidden from public view, a darkness even effectively hidden from others within, leaving victims to suffer alone and in silence, with no place to turn for help in the traumatic aftermath of sexual violence in their culture. As awareness increases, the narrative is changing in some conservative Anabaptist settings, but many are still hesitant to acknowledge the problem exists, even when evidence suggests that I believe abuse has reached systemically epidemic proportions in some settings.

## THE CONSERVATIVE ANABAPTISTS

Anabaptism, as a religious movement within Christianity, is as an umbrella identity for various Mennonite and Amish denominations that have emerged across roughly 500 years. Early and enduring definers of the movement included adult baptism, non-resistance, and non-violence (Good 1998). As Anabaptists suffered persecution for their purist lifestyle, they met in secret for their

own safety, eventually becoming socially reclusive. Today's Conservative Anabaptists remain relatively insular and private, albeit to degrees varying by group. Many continue avoiding secular influences in social interactions, and some still limit interactions with non-adherents to essentials, such as business.

Conservative Anabaptists tend to feel they are among the most faithful groups in Christianity. Across Anabaptist groups, interactions tend to be with those of similar levels of conservatism, since those who are worldlier might bring apostasy, that is, departure from the true faith. Some room is given to non-Anabaptist Christians who may not know better, having not been taught beliefs such as the head veiling for women, male leadership, separated attire, and various other doctrinal positions. Holiness in every area of life is of utmost importance, to maintain a pure witness. The command to “Abstain from all appearance of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22, King James Version) guides their rejection of anything judged to appear worldly. Thus, the topic of sexual abuse is particularly difficult to address because it mars both the group’s self-image and their public image as a, more-or-less, chosen and pure people.

The “separation from the world” doctrine is designed to guard against influences causing members to stray from or corrupt their faith. Business ties, and other close partnerships and relationships, tend to be with those of “like precious faith,”<sup>2</sup> i.e., those within similar Anabaptist settings. Similarly, marriage partners and closer/frequent social relations are expected to be among co-adherents. Approved teaching materials and books are produced by co-adherents. Reading other materials—such as mainstream Christian books—while not directly forbidden in constitutions and rulebooks, is discouraged, as a guard against external ideas (Mast 2004, 219). Bible interpretation is deemed to be trustworthy only when it does not conflict with the church constitution. Only a few internal books vetted through major publishers have addressed sexual abuse, let alone sexuality,

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication. “Like precious faith” was a common expression used in my growing up years in the conservative Anabaptist community and referred to those who are similar to us, with allowance that others more conservative are also Christians, and those more liberal are heading toward apostasy, falling away from the true faith and church.

in the past quarter-century (e.g. Coblenz 1999; Coblenz 2002; Shank 2007). Stricter Anabaptist groups would not readily accept such books because they come from more lenient Conservative Anabaptists. Author John Coblenz, for example, served as a pastor for many years in the conservative Midwest Mennonite Fellowship (MF). However, Midwest MF is considered by some as more lenient, e.g. in allowing radio use.

The relative insularism of Conservative Anabaptists, especially among stricter groups, is liable to shape when and how abuse occurs and how it is addressed. In the next section, I identify major themes in the literature about sexual abuse in Christian contexts and relate these themes to Conservative Anabaptist-specific dynamics.

### **SEXUAL ABUSE IN CHRISTIAN CONTEXTS: RESEARCH ON CHRISTIAN SETTINGS AND CORRESPONDING DYNAMICS AMONG CONSERVATIVE MENNONITES**

Existing peer reviewed published research about sexual abuse in conservative Anabaptist settings is not readily available. As such, my point of departure was to first investigate sexual abuse and family violence in other religious contexts (Fortune and Poling 2004), asking the question: Are cultural-religious ideas and structures in other religious settings transferable to Conservative Anabaptists? To assess how formal religious teachings of the Mennonites relate to themes in the literature, I consulted several sources. For formal denominational statements, I pulled from the 1995 Conservative Mennonite Churches of Ontario (CMCO) constitution, which outlines member conduct and practices, and from a 2004 Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church (EMPC) booklet addressing various child-rearing topics and how the church should respond to social workers and law enforcement in cases of abuse allegations. I selected these because of their availability—many Conservative Anabaptist denominations have not articulated their ideas in such detailed written statements—and because of my autobiographical familiarity with the CMCO and EMPC, which have a comparatively similar theology and practice. I also analyzed several Conservative Anabaptist books that are not necessarily officially sanctioned

church documents but are widely accessed within Conservative Anabaptist homes for child training, guiding teens through adolescence, and instructing women and youth on how to behave and dress. My personal experience as a past member of the CMCO served as a resource for understanding some of the deeper layers of meaning within various teaching texts.

In this review, I consider how religious contexts can enable “silence.” Silence is defined as the absence of social space to acknowledge, process, and address an offense. The absence of such social spaces may be incidental, enforced by other co-adherents such as leaders, and/or a product of victims’ guilt or some other self-enforcing sense of obligation.

#### **1. The Importance of Forgiveness**

The importance of forgiveness was the most common theme I found in the literature (e.g. Knickmeyer, Levitt and Horne 2010, 102; Nason-Clark 2004, 304). Sometimes, though not always, forgiveness also meant that the victims were expected to forget the wrongs committed (Clark 2004, 71; Knight and Hugenberger 2007; Hamman 2012, 440; Rudolfsson and Tidefors 2015, 460; Tener and Eisikovits 2017, 2504), even rushed through a process of forgiveness, thus bypassing a deeply healing journey (Doyle 2009, 46; Rudolfsson and Tidefors 2015, 461). One author describes this prescribed forgiveness as “toxic” for all involved, saying the victim takes on guilt, and the institution misses out on growth by “pushing the whole issue [of sexual abuse] into the shadows” (Doyle 2009, 246). Another defines it as “cheap grace [that] is void of God [...] and often turns forgiveness into an abusive experience” (Hamman 2012, 438). Victims struggle when pressured to forget the offense, feeling it excludes or denies part of their experience (Tener and Eisikovits 2017, 2504) and does not allow time to grieve and “suffer through the hurt until they worked it out” (Rudolfsson and Tidefors 2015, 460). According to Knight and Hugenberger (2007, 1), scientific evidence speaks to the benefits of sincere forgiveness, but forcing it on victims robs them of the benefits of forgiveness, thereby primarily serving those who wish to avoid “responsibility and accountability for the crime of abuse” (Doyle 2009, 246).

The CMCO, as an example of many Mennonite groups sharing similar sentiments, states the following in their constitution:

Rumours against members are not to be spread, but to be taken up in a scriptural manner, to ascertain the truth by *first-hand* brotherly love. [...] No grievance can be brought up against another after peace has been expressed, or communion observed, except where serious phases of the matter were hidden and unknown. (CMCO 1995, 23) [emphasis added].

It speaks of offenses as “rumours” and requires that victims first face the wrongdoer before seeking other help. If offenses are raised and acknowledged (forgiven), the offense is not to be revisited. But this process assumes that those accused of offenses will be truthful. What if the offense is not acknowledged?: “Members cannot be held guilty of that which they declare themselves innocent, except by the testimony of two or three reliable witnesses; otherwise the matter must be left between themselves and God” (CMCO 1995, 23). If the offender is not truthful and witnesses cannot be found (sexual abuse rarely has third party witnesses), no further recourse exists. In such situations, victims have little other choice but to forgive and let go. Coblenz (1999), a Conservative Mennonite forward-thinking for his time and culture, who authored *Beauty for Ashes*, suggests that forgiveness is one reason for a victim to confront their abuser, to give the abuser an opportunity to own his wrongs (p. 69). But this ideal may well be far from the reality. While he argues forgiveness can free victims, it is likely to impose silence on them or potentially re-victimize them.

Furthermore, members are taught not to go to law against a fellow church member. They believe that it is sin to do so, because 1 Corinthians 6:1-2 says, “Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?” Coblenz (1999), however, states that perpetrators of sexual abuse should be confronted by authorities, including law enforcement officers (p. 68). However, in this, his teachings are an exception and not the norm; to go to law is to appear as unforgiving.

## 2. Family Values and Loyalty

This theme also appeared frequently (e.g. Jeremiah, Quinn, and Alexis 2017). It included references to people invoking Ephesians 6:2 to silence children who had been abused by a parent, telling them to “honor their fathers and their mothers” (Clark 2004, 69). The need for personal safety is in constant tension with the obligation to protect family honour, be in the presence of the perpetrator at family events, and keep the peace (Tener and Eisikovits 2017, 2405-06). Preserving these family relationships requires the victim to forgive the perpetrator (Tener and Eisikovits 2017, 2505-06) or risk being ostracized. Clark (2004, 71-72) responds with this: “How tragic! Human beings [...] punished for someone else’s sin [...] for speaking out and doing the right thing. Punished for believing that the truth could set them free. Punished for *speaking out and breaking the code of silence*” [italics in original]. He states that, while victims are blamed for destroying families by speaking out, in reality, Jesus said, in Matthew 10:34-35, that He divides families, and encourages victims not to take that burden on themselves.

Conservative Anabaptists believe men are the head of the home, and as such, the spiritual leaders who are responsible for family devotions, the general spiritual health and direction of the family, and their material sustenance (Mast 2004, 25-26). Fathers are to be honoured and obeyed by the wife and the children (Mast 2004, 311). The role of the wife and daughters is to serve the men in the home, caring for the house, the meals, and day-to-day functioning of the family. The daughter’s role is to serve, not to be served (Mast 2004, 318). Where men dominate the home and expect to be honored and served by women, women and girls can easily be victimized by men, and this arrangement can give men the power to silence them.

## 3. Christian Image and Reputation

The idea of religious image and reputation influences silence in two ways: through obligating victims to feel responsible for protecting the group’s image and through offenders employing their prestige and charm—built by appearing spiritually minded—so that no one believes they are capable of abuse (Knickmeyer, Levitt, and Horne 2010, 99, 104). The positive identity of the

church as an institution is carefully guarded, and the “unrealistic emphasis is not on the abuse and its powerfully destructive effects on the victim [as it should be], but on a future wherein the sexual abuse is not an embarrassment for the [church]” (Doyle 2009, 241).

The Conservative Anabaptist culture is one of intricate lifestyle detail: the shirt color and pants style of men, the smallest design on a woman’s clothes, the size and shape of the head veiling, when men should or should not wear hats, and a variety of language and behavioral matters.<sup>3</sup> This focus on presentation is concerned in part with how the church will be perceived by the world: “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches” (Proverbs 22:1). How the church believes the public perceives the church is important. Since the church represents God, it should appear as “a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27, King James Version).

Children learn cultural expectations at a young age. If parents are to raise children to live up to “a pattern of good works, [parents] must begin when [children] are young. [...] Punish him for disobedience and encourage him when he obeys” (Mast 2004, 238). The author quotes Proverbs 20:11, “Even a child is known by his doings [...]” and then asks, “When someone mentions the name of a child, what image do we see?” (Mast 2004, 239). She encourages parents to be aware of what each child needs—more discipline, or less—based on performance “to fit the direction we want them to go” (Mast 2004, 239). Mast dedicates four pages (pp. 272-75) to the importance of molding the child through discipline—referring predominantly to spanking, and even specifies that “on top of the diaper is not enough” (p. 275). Mast quotes numerous Bible verses, including “Thou shalt beat him with a rod, and thou shalt deliver his soul from hell” (Proverbs 23:14), while instructing parents how to teach children compliance and good behaviour. Such a level of self-control expected even

of preschoolers shows the intensity of the perfect image programming.

The deeply ingrained awareness of image follows children throughout life and may latently inform how cases of sexual abuse are silenced. Church members may be concerned with how such a crime will make them look to outsiders. The family is concerned with how they will be perceived in the system. The offender, if he has mastered the skill of performance, will win the support of others, who will find it difficult to believe he is capable of such a thing. And the victim is concerned that she will not be believed. Even if she were believed, she is concerned with what will happen if she breaks rank and speaks out. How will she be punished? Will she be blamed?

#### **4. Fear of Secular Influence**

This theme represents processes such as church leaders cautioning other congregants against referring co-religionists to secular resources; the theme is occasionally addressed in the literature. The fear of church leaders is that secular therapists and support professionals may advise victims to abandon their religious context because therapists may believe religious ideology plays a notable role in the prevalence of abuse. Nason-Clark (2004) argues that secular language avoiding religious values is “powerless to alter a religious victim’s resolve [to stay].” Conversely, the spiritual language that doesn’t provide for the practical fails to meet the “victim’s need for safety, security and financial resources to care for herself” (p. 304). Therefore, church leaders need not feel threatened by the secular, as each fills a different need.

Conservative Anabaptists manage secular influences by stressing the importance of the separated church. Throughout many teachings, the subtle message is that Conservative Anabaptists represent “the church” (Showalter 1982, 23) or even “the true church” (Coblentz 2002); as such, questioning the church is not acceptable and could cause spiritual struggle for the children (Mast 2004, 312). Members support the church by attending nearly all services and events, making church their primary source for social life, which helps avoid secular influences (Mast 2004, 221-224). Baptism often takes place at around age 13 to 15, and with baptism comes church member-

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<sup>3</sup> Personal communication. Much of what is taught in the culture is not written in books but preached across the pulpit on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and Wednesday evenings... including the detail of how often a church should hold services, so as not to lose their faith.

ship, ensuring church control early in life.<sup>4</sup> In a chapter addressing parents' goals for their children, Mast (2004) writes, "We want our sons to [...] join hands with the faithful brethren in the church" (p. 233), noting that such a son is highly honoured.

Families, as a central social unit within the separated church, are a primary source of social life, including interactions with other families. This is more understood than overtly taught, though it appears throughout some teaching books (e.g. Coblenz 2002; Mast 2004; Wengert 2017). Mast, in writing "Since *our* homes, schools and churches are the places our teens grow up..." (p. 302; emphasis added), leaves the assumption that there is little external influence. She gives the reason as such: "It is imperative that these institutions speak in a united voice" (p. 302).

The elevated place of the church also shows up in the strict rules regarding influences that do not fall in line with the church's teaching, such as reading materials (Mast 2004, 219-20), friendships, and business partnerships (CMCO 1995, 19). Scriptures such as 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, where Christians are told not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers, reinforce the concept of church separation as God's law. This keeps other influences at bay, protecting the voice of the church as a highly esteemed source of knowledge and the primary lens through which members perceive the world. While there are exceptions, such as doctors, psychiatrists, and lawyers—should one be needed for writing wills, defense against a lawsuit, or processing an abuse allegation—or some other professionals who do not offer intimate counseling, with some exceptions, the more Conservative Anabaptists tend to discourage close relationships with those who are not of the same faith (CMCO 1995, 19; Mast 2004, 221-24).

The Mennonites' high view of the separated church can inform silencing of sexual abuse cases. First, when leaders invoke scriptures and their trusted position, they assume ultimate power, so members are discouraged from questioning deeper, personally protecting motives. Second, their high view of the separated church effectively ensures that members will not speak to non-members of problems within the church.

## 5. Gender and Sexuality

While these two somewhat interrelated themes were only indirectly addressed in my focused literature review, childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault are inherently about gender and sexuality. In religious contexts with patriarchal views, gender-based organization may silence women and exclude their experiences. The literature did address gender concepts implicitly in several places (Tailor, et al. 2014; Jeremiah, Quinn, and Alexis 2017, 54), as in one study that portrayed victims of abuse as subservient and powerless (Knickmeyer, Levitt, and Horne 2010). Tailor and colleagues (2014) cite "patriarchal power [...] male dominance [...] and valuation of women in traditional family roles" (p. 873), among other factors, as contributing to the prevalence of sexual abuse. It was also identified as a more pronounced problem in Christian culture due to the "male-centered nature of the Christian faith" (Tailor, et al. 2014, 873). Speaking specifically of clergy abusing women and children, Fortune and Poling (2004) address the faulty theology behind silence, saying, if the church "refus[es] to address rape and sexual violence, then we must be prophetic voices to protest such a theology" (p. 30).

Among Conservative Mennonites, covert language is commonly used when teaching about sexuality. Parents are instructed to teach their children about "purity"—at times referred to as innocence—and modesty, the two being closely linked (Coblenz 2002, 48-53; EPMC 2004, 25-26; Keepers at Home Magazine 2017, 48, 114; Mast 2004, 363-64). Mothers are responsible for modesty in behaviour and attire, to train their daughters not to sexually tempt males (Mast 2004, 364). From early childhood on, mothers may teach daughters to keep skirts well below the knees and to "teach them the proper way to sit, with knees together" (Keepers at Home Magazine 2017, 48).

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<sup>4</sup>Personal communication. As someone baptized in the Conservative Anabaptist church, I recall kneeling in front of the church as the Bishop poured water over my head, followed by extending his hand and saying, "In the name of Christ and His Church, I give you my hand, Arise... as long as thou art faithful to Christ and the Church..." thereby solidifying in my mind that this was 'the church' and my salvation hinged directly on obedience to its rules, in particular, since disobeying church rules resulted in excommunication and being labelled backslidden.

Mast (2004) suggests that if girls put their legs in the air while playing, “a spank on their bare upper leg serves as a good reminder to keep their dresses down” (p. 364), and that “[i]t is neither modest nor ladylike to sprawl on a couch or a chair with knees spread apart” (p. 364). The purity mandate and the shame of body and sexuality are placed mostly on women and girls (Landis 1978, 14; EPMC 2004, 26; Mast 2004, 363-64; Keepers at Home Magazine 2017, 48, 114,169-72).

Young people engaging in premarital sex are severely punished. With several exceptions, where sex drives are normalized and acknowledged as God ordained (Shank 2007; Keepers at Home Magazine 2017), the messages about sex are conveyed ominously. Failure to preserve sexual purity and innocence is considered tragic; it can leave one forever scarred, whether that sexual interaction is a personal choice or the result of sexual abuse. The loss of purity is grieved deeply. This ideal prompts those who have lost that innocence to keep silent. To speak out could be identified as impure. When that innocence is lost through sexual assault, the shame is yet deeper because the victim is stripped, not only of sexual purity but of her power to protect the single most valued treasure she has been given by God. Since family, modest attire, and her meek and quiet spirit should have protected her (Mast 2004, 310-14), the victim can easily reason that it is somehow her fault. Thus, the easiest way to continue fitting into the culture is to hide the abuse.

## Conclusion

This literature review reveals deeply embedded patterns throughout Christianity that contribute to the problem of sexual abuse, while the survey of primary literature among Conservative Mennonites suggests that these themes may similarly inform sexual abuse in their setting.

## METHODOLOGY

Using the five themes in the literature as guidance, I analyzed the testimonies of 12 survivors of sexual abuse within Conservative Anabaptist groups. As an activist against sexual abuse, I receive many unsolicited contacts, and for this study, my respondents come from such contacts. Pseudonyms are used for all respondents. Stories

were shared in personal messages via email and Facebook Messenger and varied in length from a paragraph or two, to twenty or more pages. Survivor testimonies represented include EPMC, CMCO, Keystone Mennonite Fellowship, Pilgrim Mennonite Conference, and unidentified Conservative Anabaptist groups. All testimonies were female except one, where a father writes about his sons. These communications represent a convenience sample of Conservative Mennonites even as I am thinking more broadly about Conservative Anabaptism. Many denominations exist among Conservative Anabaptists, with groups varying in degrees of isolation and separation from other Christians and mainstream society (Anderson 2013). Some have more fluid, open boundaries than others when addressing problems such as abuse; such openness does not necessarily correlate with relative strictness or Anabaptist tradition. Certainly, individuals and groups within Conservative Anabaptism are seeking to bring change and create space for victims to share their stories, where the crimes of sexual violence are addressed.

In analysis, I searched for ways in which the study participants referred to being silenced, reasons they gave for being silent, and how cultural beliefs and teachings influenced this silence. Survivors often referenced a culture of silence and described tactics and teachings Anabaptist adherents used to enforce silence. That said, not all participants referenced cultural teachings or connected the abuse to theological beliefs, and those with multiple pages of story offered deeper insights. At the time of writing their stories, many survivors were either in the throes of working through the trauma or in the earlier stages of acknowledging they were survivors, thereby offering raw and vulnerable insights. I drew most from those who shared in-depth experience and story—meaning those with more than a few paragraphs—and from those who articulated struggles that fall in line with this study’s objectives.

Approval for the study was obtained through the University of Waterloo Ethics Committee, and survivors were offered anonymity and privacy, to protect their identity. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form, authorizing the use of their stories for this research with the right to withdraw permission for the study at any point up until the completion of the study.

## RESULTS: SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES AND STORIES

### 1. Theologies Contributing to Silence

Throughout the survivor stories, certain church theologies appear related to silence. The pressure to forgive was the most common theme, followed by avoiding legal involvement, then family values. A handful of other teachings were mentioned just a few times.

#### *A. FORGIVENESS*

Forgiveness is a dominant theme in Anabaptist theology and is one of their better known values. Given the intimate nature of sexual violations and the ongoing trauma, victims struggle with the teaching that forgiveness is evidenced only through forgetting and never speaking of it again. One survivor, Penny, writes, “It is hard to forgive and move on.” Her tone communicates that this should be a normal process in recovering from sexual abuse, and co-adherents may suggest she is failing for not forgiving. She goes on to point out her struggle with this teaching, saying, “We forgive and turn our back and let [the offender] keep doing what he’s doing.”

Several survivors write that their abuser(s) were forced to apologize and did so without even acknowledging the sex crimes committed. The victims were then expected to offer forgiveness, and it was never to be spoken of again. If brought up in discussions later, survivors were accused of being unforgiving, and their spirituality or Christian faith questioned. Addressing the problem of forced apologies, Penny writes, “Forcing apologies doesn’t even begin to address abuse properly. Both victims and perpetrators are left hanging.” And in another place, she says: “[Perpetrators] just make a confession and they’re sent off good to go.”

If leaders require perpetrators to confess in church when caught, the entire congregation is expected to forgive and never speak of the wrongs again. The nature of the wrong may not be explicitly named due to propriety; instead, a general confession of immoral failing with an accompanying plea for forgiveness is accepted. The congregation is then given opportunity to respond, such

as by rising to their feet, which symbolizes their forgiveness and readiness to receive the individual back into fellowship. The offender may be placed on church discipline for a time. These practices all vary across congregations and groups.<sup>5</sup>

While several participants named forgiveness as a positive and healing part of overcoming sexual abuse, most often, they spoke with trepidation or frustration, feeling as though it is used to minimize their suffering and impose silence. After an offender admits to having wronged the victim—albeit rarely acknowledging its full extent, its vileness, and even the criminality of it—and asks the victim to forgive, the congregation considers the event completely resolved, as if it never happened. To forgive, they teach, is to do as God does when He says in scriptures that “their sins and iniquities I will remember no more” (Hebrews 8:12). Once the offender has asked forgiveness and the victim has extended it—whether by choice or coercion—speaking of sins, even for the purpose of working through trauma, may be labeled as showing bitterness.

Thus, while the church rarely tells victims to be silent, in so many words—though there are such cases—it is a silent message, carefully woven into the teaching on forgiveness, ensuring that victims dare not speak out. Its message is insidious, sounding truly righteous and good, but in reality, it manipulates victims into feeling guilty when they speak, so that they become the one at fault. They must choose between being labeled as unforgiving and accepting the greater shame of the crime by speaking out, or the curse of walking through life in silence, unable to heal.

#### *B. AVOIDING USE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT*

Avoiding use of law enforcement was cited almost as frequently in survivor stories. This references the Anabaptist theological views on non-resistance and the ability of the separated church to retain autonomy and control. When survivors proposed to church leaders that sexual abuse situations needed legal intervention, they consistently met resistance. Penny’s church leaders said they would “like to have [...] a committee that gets to hear abuse concerns. [...] (i)nstead of going

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<sup>5</sup> Personal communication. Our church practiced this growing up, as did others we visited.

straight to the state. The committee then would decide if the concerns get passed to the state or not.” Following a meeting with their church leaders several months later, she writes, “The bishop’s wife had a big rant [in Sunday School class] about how we are NOT to use the law” [emphasis in original].

Anabaptist adherents may argue that engaging the law does not honor God’s law, quoting Hebrews 11:13 (“that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth”) or 1 Corinthians 6:6 (“But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?”). This rationale suggests that engaging the law against others within the church is sin and that Christians ought rather to suffer the consequences of being wronged than to engage unbelievers in the justice system.

To what end, one might ask, is separation of church and state critical in criminal cases? In the event of theft, murder, or assault committed by a non-adherent, Conservative Anabaptists often deem it right, even a necessary act of submission to governing authorities. Yet, in cases of sexual assault within the church, policy, formal or informal, emerges that prevents the use of law. But why is this silence so important when lives are clearly destroyed by rape, incest, and molestation? The answer lies in looking at what is most threatened in sexual abuse cases: family relationships when the abuser is in the family; church image and relationships when abuse is perpetrated by an adherent; and, finally, one of the most deeply held values—the purity teaching. Much of the church’s standards, constitution, and way of life focus on these three things: church, family, and modesty, as promoting sexual purity. If the law is involved and the crimes go public, that image is shattered. If the image is shattered, they face collective humiliation.

### **C. FAMILY VALUES**

Family values play a dynamic role in silence, and, as with forgiveness, the Bible is used to back up associated teachings. The church is understood as the ultimate authority and conduit through which God speaks and the ultimate authority re-

garding how people live. The family is seen as the most sacred unit within the church. Church leaders invest in family as the day-to-day embodiment of the church’s teachings, while the family unit lives and functions for the church.

As such, family members are discouraged from speaking to anyone outside of the family about abuse within the family, lest the family institution be disrupted. To maintain and control that risk, children are taught to honour their parents to the extent that they are forbidden to mention incest to anyone. Penny, whose father passed away before she was born, was later molested by her mother, and writes, “I remember how it was for me as a child. I felt I needed to be loyal to my mom.” To this day, her story remains an untold secret, shared only with a few trusted friends and with myself.

Survivors write of family members threatening to cut off relationships if they dare speak about abuse, causing victims to fear the loss of the only relationships they have ever known intimately. This makes silence look inviting. Mandy writes, “Me and my husband’s siblings feel very lost as to how to handle this situation without breaking up the family.” Losing relationships so core to every part of your life—church, school, and day-to-day living—is frightening for abuse survivors, and that is what makes the value of family one of the most powerful tools for silencing victims. Survivors of abuse have already lost so much and often carry deep shame and guilt over that loss, as though it is somehow their fault. The thought of losing the only support system they have ever known is too much; silence becomes the best or only path to survival.

Several participants mentioned more blatant theological teaching, where Bible verses are referenced and quoted alongside strict orders not to speak. Wendy tells of an encounter with her bishop and his wife, and how at their first meeting “[The bishop] launched into ME with a vengeance! He said he has heard from 2 sources [...] I have been saying unkind things about stuff my dad did in the past that was taken care of!! I was in a state of shock!” [emphasis in original]. Wendy had been raped by her father “hundreds if not thousands of times,” and when she spoke out, she was accused of saying unkind things about her dad, slandering him, “a kind, friendly man.” She goes on to say that the bishop then ordered her to never speak of it again, even if her intent was to help others

“because he is the bishop and I must obey his lead. [...] As long as my dad is in the church I need to honor and respect him and never tell anyone about what he did to me in his past.” Other survivors share similar stories, torn over telling the truth, breaking the silence of abuse, and holding to deeply ingrained family values.

To back up the authority of church leaders giving the orders, Hebrews 13:17 is commonly quoted: “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief.” To back up ordering silence regarding parental sins, the words in Ephesians 6:1-3 are invoked: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.” Children who choose not to honor their parents are not promised long life; therefore, to dishonour parents is to take your life into your hands and walk in condemnation. By equating silence with honor, this verse effectively becomes a threat of a shortened life span, should victims speak out.

## **2. Tactics and Processes Used to Silence and Coerce Victims**

Survivors spoke frequently of the processes fellow co-religionists, family, and friends use to silence victims. Ranging from church discipline to withholding family relationships to threats of physical harm, the methods used varied widely from survivor to survivor. Some mentioned only the fear of such tactics, with no evidence or mention of them ever being used, while others shared tactic after tactic and ways their leaders or family tried to silence them.

### **A. CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES**

Formal and informal consequences were the most frequently mentioned tactics to silence victims. Wendy writes,

“I was in a(n) emotional breakdown [...] and [my husband] had to watch me constantly for suicide but the BISHOP INSISTED he needed to come talk to me. I cried and begged [my husband] not to let him, [I] tried to refuse to come downstairs

but [my husband] forced me to because if we didn’t WE wouldn’t be able to get church membership” [emphasis in original].

And Penny, having already suffered significant backlash, says, “If we get kicked out [of church] because of [speaking out about abuse], then we’re better off.” Other survivors referenced being discredited by leaders so their stories wouldn’t be believed, and being given the silent treatment and ignored, or being avoided by various people in church. Some victims feared being ostracized while others, like Penny, resigned themselves to this being the price to pay for finding their voices. She said, “I feel at peace with the stand I’m taking, even if it gets us kicked out of church.”

Another tactic was prompting victims to question if they are sinning by speaking out. Penny says, “I was warned this morning about making sure I’m doing the right thing.” Speaking of another person’s sins is quickly labeled as slander or gossip, if not also unforgiveness, and is condemned. Various Bible verses are invoked to support silencing, such as Romans 1:29-32, where gossip and slander are named among murder and hating God, and another in Proverbs 6:16, 19, where the author points out six things God hates, including “sowing discord among the brethren.” Since allegations of abuse are divisive to the point of causing church divisions,<sup>6</sup> this argument can cause deep struggles in victims as they question whether silence is the Biblical response. At one point, Penny mentions being approached by a fellow church member after she started speaking out about sexual abuse, who said they “don’t want the church to split over bringing this sin to light.”

These tactics cause survivors to question whether they are overreacting and making too big a deal of the abuse. Is it maybe not as bad as they imagined? Are they doing more damage than good by exposing it? On top of the fear of gossiping, slandering, and committing an abomination against God by sowing discord, they are told that the Bible explicitly says, in Ephesians 5:12 that

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<sup>6</sup>Personal communication. A friend messaged me at the time of writing to say a local church split over a young woman who was raped. Most of the church leaders felt she was partially responsible, while she maintained she was victimized, and many members disapproved of the proposed church discipline.

"It is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret." This means it is sinful to talk about sexual abuse, and, if not repented of—meaning to repent for speaking against the offender—requires church discipline. Thus, victims can be further subjected to abuse by either being put on a probation period or, if deemed serious enough and the individual rebellious enough, being excommunicated from church membership.

### **B. WITHHOLDING FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

Family members may threaten to withhold normal relationships as a tactic to silence victims. Survivors speak of being isolated from family, or when nieces and nephews are not allowed to communicate with them as uncle and aunt, because they are causing trouble in the family by speaking out or reporting. As Connie writes, after sharing how her mom and sister both witnessed her father molesting her, she said, "I have siblings who are sure I am making up the story. [...] I honestly am not sure how much of [their opinion] silences me because I doubt myself, [and] how much of it is not feeling like dealing with it."

To silence victims using family relationships is a powerful tool in a culture where church comes first and within a system where family unit is valued above all. While not mentioned as frequently as forgiveness, the number of times family values are mentioned in relation to speaking out about sexual abuse attests to the power and fear associated with losing those relationships. Having relations withheld by those you have been taught to honor, support, and hold most dear is the ultimate rejection. Given their separated lifestyle and lack of interaction with the world, this typically means they are truly isolated and abandoned when family relations are lost, as it also impacts friendships in the church when they speak out about sexual abuse against a fellow member.

### **3. Lack of Awareness**

Survivors wrote about the lack of awareness about sexuality, lack of awareness about the prevalence or even the presence of sexual abuse in the community, and lack of understanding regarding what constitutes sexual abuse or the harm it does to victims. According to these survivors, lack of awareness in each of these areas contributes to

the prevalence of sexual abuse and how sexual abuse is handled, as well as the silence and lack of reporting. Victims and offenders alike lacked understanding of what constitutes healthy sexuality, due to lack of sex education.

Of the offender, Mandy writes, "I really wonder if he understands how wrong it is [to molest] because it is something that happens too often in [the Conservative Anabaptist] culture." Referring to years of being raped by her father and telling no one until after she had a baby, at which time her doctor broached the subject, Wendy discloses her lack of awareness, even in the face of horrific childhood sexual abuse:

I would have swore I had a normal childhood. I told the doctor I had a fine childhood. I had no clue EVERY MENNONITE DAD didn't have sexual-painful abusive sex with his girls from babyhood!! No one told me otherwise and we are to obey and believe our parents!! the bible says so!! But in bed that night I fearfully asked [my husband] if it is alright for a dad to have sex with his girls? I had NOT A CLUE at age 24 that was even wrong. [emphasis in original]

Most Conservative Anabaptists would recognize this as abuse and condemn the way Wendy was treated. However, abuse that does not involve penetration is downplayed by many, if it is acknowledged as abuse at all. Deanna points this out when she says, "It's crazy how many people [in our culture] think it's just rape [that qualifies as sexual assault]."

The value placed on purity and the lack of teaching about sex and abuse creates a vulnerable context. This lack of awareness impacts not only abusers, who have little understanding of their developing sex drive or how to manage it, but also victims, who have no understanding of what has happened to them and why it causes struggle and shame. The broader community is also impacted as these dynamics play out among them, causing relational struggles and mental health issues. That Ephesians 5:12—"a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret"—is construed, by some, as though teaching about these things will tempt people to do them, spiritualizes the absence of teaching, and makes speaking out seem sinful. The result is that, just as little children have no words to describe being molested, the lack of teaching surrounding sex and sexual

abuse leaves victims with no language or context to speak of their suffering, thereby contributing to the silence.

#### 4. A Christian Culture of Silence

Whether as a result of the lack of teachings regarding sex and sexual abuse, or due to the avoidance of legal entanglements, or other influencing factors, survivor stories tended to highlight the Conservative Anabaptist culture as a culture that covers up sexual abuse. “[Our bishop] is hell bent on keeping the state away and keeping abuse from being uncovered it seems,” writes Penny, using strong language that is out of character within the culture. This culture of silence is further reflected in comments such as,

(N)obody talks. The trooper [...] [met] with some Amish but it didn’t go anywhere because the bishop disapproved. [...] You might hear bits and [pieces] of this girl has abuse in her history etc. but you never ever talk about what happened and especially not in detail.

Or: “Any book that blatantly speaks about sexual abuse was deemed unfit to read.” These statements speak to silence as a cultural norm; it is just the way things are. Connie adds, “Christians [...] don’t want to deal with the messy and the ugly.” Petra says, “[The] control and manipulation in these structures [make it] hard to call it church.” As a result of silence in the culture, Stella writes, “Abusers in the plain communities are almost fearless.”

Howard, who was victimized by several offenders within his family, and is also the father of several victims, shares how his sons were molested by their uncle, and one was severely beaten by their grandfather after he walked in on the abuse. Later his sons were told by their grandma never to speak of it, not even to their parents. The abuser was “severely reprimanded and let go.” In my extended family and the families of some of my friends, victims were beaten when abuse was discovered, and the offenders were let off the hook. When young children were caught exploring, having no understanding of sexuality, they were spanked. This inconsistency, of whipping children caught experimenting or when victimized, while turning a proverbial blind eye to the real crimes of adults, breaks down trust and destroys families.

Throughout the stories, some survivors argue that the intentions behind the silence are often good, but the outcome is clearly devastating because it gives power to the abuser to continue molesting, robs the victim of her/his voice, and perpetuates the cycle of abuse. While intended to protect the culture and its religious systems and norms, it can actually accomplish the opposite, causing members to call into question the system’s safety and validity and destroying its very foundation.

#### 5. Protection of Perpetrators and Disregard/Apathy toward Victims of Abuse

One of the most common themes—with over 50 mentions—was disregard/apathy toward abuse. Responses focused on covering up the offense, not taking abuse seriously, not dealing with the offender (whether within the church or through the legal system), looking the other way, or not being concerned until the system was challenged or threatened. In essence, victims felt that there was no regard for their suffering and no concern for abusers or commitment to intervention.

Penny writes, “(S)even girls were abused [years ago] by someone [who still is] in our church and the ministry [...] always turned a blind eye.” She continues by describing an encounter with one of these victims, saying, “[She] blew up to me about it yesterday and said the ministry turned their heads [the other way].” A cavalier parental attitude toward sexual abuse plays an immediate role in silencing victims, in particular when mothers or grandmothers, who are perceived to be compassionate and nurturing, disregard abuse. When Howard’s young sons were molested by their uncle, and after their grandfather beat one of the victims, it was their grandmother who later told Howard’s sons never to speak of it, even with their parents.

Respondents suggested that apathy arose when an abuse case seemed to threaten the cultural-religious values of church, family, forgiveness, male leadership—and respect for all males as leaders of some sort—and non-engagement with the legal system. Petra describes it as “well-intentioned secrecy.” Nevertheless, it communicates to victims that their story is not important and their suffering is not valid. One suggested that the most important thing for the church leaders is keeping

the perpetrator out of prison. Others pointed to the number of people of status involved in the abuses or the importance of religious image and family relationships as reasons for inaction. It was clear respondents didn't accept these excuses, and Penny, who believed that disregard was an active attempt to cover for offenders, frames it well, saying, "Resistance and silencing is completely different than someone who's just ignorant to abuse because they haven't experienced it." She left no room for excusing repeated inaction while still acknowledging that some are legitimately unaware of the problem of abuse.

## 6. Patriarchy and Objectification

In a patriarchal system, gender-related silence may well be inevitable. Penny, a forthright and expressive young woman who has suffered unimaginable abuse, addresses both silencing and objectification, when she writes, "Girls don't have a say. They're used like toys." Wendy echoes this, saying, "Mennonite men from my past—from pastors to family—[...] refuse to [validate] the pain or abuse and instead want to explain it away [...] Men like that make up 50% of the Mennonite population I would dare to say!" Her counselor, a Mennonite and trained psychotherapist, told her that women use triggers as a means for manipulating and controlling their husbands. Wendy's husband was bewildered by the therapist's aggressive comments, and they never returned to that therapist.

Penny shared how their church leaders showed little interest in hearing of the abuse she suffered or the suffering of victims she attempted to support, instead shifting their focus to her attire. The focus on women dressing modestly to avoid tempting men can inadvertently place responsibility for men's crimes on the women and children. If a child is molested, a mother may question whether she failed to make the clothes modestly enough. If a young woman is sexually assaulted, questions may arise about what she was wearing or how she was conducting herself. An Old Order Mennonite friend who advocates for victims within their community shared with me how an Amish child under age ten was brought to her for support. The mother bemoaned the fact that she had tried to make sure her children were modestly clothed, yet, somehow, she felt she had failed

when her husband had fallen into sin and molested the daughter. She mused whether her little girl had forgotten herself and not kept her skirt or sleeves down modestly enough. My Old Order friend interrupted her and told her it was her husband's sin—not her fault or her daughter's—that drove the man to molest; it was uncertain whether the mother accepted that. Bible verses regarding modesty such as 1 Peter 3:1-5, Bible stories focusing on immoral women tempting men, or the church constitution may be used to justify imposing this responsibility on women, who may feel blamed, voiceless, and silenced.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This qualitative study is based on 12 contacts whose stories were analyzed through the lens of literature about sexual abuse in Christian settings, doctrinal policies of Conservative Mennonites, and my own experience as an abuse survivor in the Mennonite setting. Findings demonstrate how group-specific religious beliefs and teachings can—inadvertently or directly—create contexts where women and children are exposed to risk of sexual abuse and where silence surrounds that abuse. Inadvertently, victims may face cultural and structural norms that discourage speaking out. Directly, leaders may exercise their authority and command victims to be silent or threaten them with discipline if they speak out. Throughout survivor stories, religious and cultural beliefs influence how sexual abuse is addressed and how victims are expected to respond.

This research represents the first major attempt to articulate and empirically validate how particular religious and cultural dynamics interact with acts of sexual abuse and silencing. However, much work remains. The Conservative Anabaptists are a complex group; their lifestyle is organized around many unwritten teachings that cannot be fully captured through either its literature or written testimonies of members. Thus, additional methodological strategies are needed to triangulate findings. These should include in-depth structured and semi-structured personal interviews with a range of survivors of abuse, including those who go against the norms and speak out within the culture, those who leave and speak out, and those who stay and choose silence (i.e. they may seek help but choose to "forgive and forget").

Additionally, while victims are a critical population for advancing our understanding of contexts of abuse, more investigation is needed into how others experience and understand abuse, including perpetrators and mediators / intermediates. This would especially help us better understand how the community experiences the theologies identified in this study and the meaning they assign to them. At no point do we see leaders in these survivors' stories leaning in, looking at sexual abuse as a problem, or hearing the heart cries of survivors; responses come from a defensive position. Is this usually the case or a consequence of the sample? We need more investigation.

This study presents in very broad terms the concepts of leaders, victims, the culture, and particular doctrinal teachings. I have only been able to scrape the surface of these people categories and ideological dynamics, and I have not been able to sufficiently address how people employ their agency in various, even contradictory, ways. Future research should advance our understanding of the relationship between particular roles, individuals, and ideas that create vulnerabilities to abuse and a context of silence. For example, how and when do particular religious dynamics inform individuals' power? Under what conditions are certain religious ideas and teachings actually pernicious? Additionally, this research has only presented ways that the context creates risk and harm; more research is needed on ways this context could or may protect victims and under what conditions this occurs.

Finally, more research is needed to help inform public professionals, including mental healthcare workers, law enforcement, and social workers, who need to navigate the culture and cases of sexual abuse. This research addresses this gap in part. Cultural upbringing plays a significant role in how victims of sexual abuse process and understand their experience. Therefore, professionals who support victims within Conservative Anabaptist culture should have at least some understanding of how their culture and its values interact with victims' experiences.

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## DISCUSSION OF TRUDY METZGER’S “SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG CONSERVATIVE ANABAPTISTS”

Because Metzger’s article holds so much that is new and promises to trigger much discussion, *JAPAS* invited two sets of conservative Anabaptist respondents to reflect on Metzger’s arguments as well as their own particular experiences working with abuse survivors. Janelle Glick, wife of minister Wendell Glick, lives in Meadville, PA, and is part of an unaffiliated Conservative Mennonite church, Shalom. She counsels women, including abuse survivors. Mark and Cindy Hochstetler live in Holmes County, OH, and are New Order Amish. They are one of three Amish couples on the local Restoration Team.

### Response 1: Janelle Glick

In her paper, Metzger has provided some much-needed qualitative findings on experiences of sexual abuse victims among Conservative Anabaptists. Her exploration of the beliefs guiding our responses can help us understand how oversimplification of certain of our beliefs and values could be inhibiting healing and freedom for victims among us. In the past five years, awareness of sexual abuse in our communities is rising rapidly, and some good conversations have begun with the intention of helping victims. We have begun owning our past mistakes, and it is my hope that we can read Metzger’s findings with humility to learn and eagerness to do better. I write from my views and experiences within a Conservative Mennonite church (unaffiliated), having completed master’s level studies in theology, spiritual care, and psychotherapy, and am currently in a second year of online coaching for Conservative Mennonite women.

#### *FORGIVENESS*

Metzger mentions the complexity of expectations of forgiveness for Conservative Anabaptist victims of sexual abuse; when their church leaders require them to “forgive and forget” and do not follow through on reporting the actions of their abusers or supporting them in seeking safety from a sexually abusive marriage, it seems that God Himself is not providing a way out. We are be-

coming aware of how our practices of forgiveness can keep us from doing justly. The Anabaptists have often practiced forgiveness as primarily an act of the intellect that releases offenders from punishment, a one-step process no matter what the offense and no matter if the offender may continue harming others. Since misuse of teachings on forgiveness is the primary theme of difficulty addressed by Metzger’s qualitative work, I hope for continued future discussions and study in this area, both within our community and with those outside our community who sometimes see us more clearly.

In my hours of listening to and supporting Conservative Anabaptist women who have suffered abusive relationships, I’ve noted how highlighting Jesus’ instructions to “forgive seventy times seven” provides them with solace and ongoing grace; they do not need to forgive “once and for all” or forget that it ever happened. As victims move at an authentic pace in the work of forgiveness, it becomes their testimony to the active presence of Christ and should not be silenced. Like Christ-like submission, if forgiveness is not chosen by the person doing it, it cannot be the real thing. We can name forgiveness as part of the healing journey, but forcing language or timing of this step without the victim’s readiness causes deeper confusion and damage.

#### *FAMILY VALUES AND LOYALTY*

Metzger points out our Anabaptist teachings on submission and how these teachings can be twisted by Conservative Anabaptist men as justification for acting as dominators rather than lovers of their families. We teach our children to respect authority but do not always hold it balanced with the acknowledgement that parents are in positions of power that make it easy to offend and provoke little ones. When children grow up knowing forced obedience to an unloving or ambivalent authority, it becomes more difficult for them to experience refuge in God. Rigid rules about family loyalty and keeping secrets is one of the signs of an unhealthy family relationship and dysfunction. Personal growth and development stalemates and adults continue believing that loving their family members means continuing in silence rather than honest and authentic expression. This silencing dynamic not only influences their personal rela-

tionships but also keeps them fearful of and silent with the Lord.

#### ***CHRISTIAN IMAGE/REPUTATION***

Metzger describes our motivation in image protection as protecting our own community or church reputations, and sadly, that is often true. The statements of those interviewed in Metzger's research mirror experiences of the stories I hear. Because Conservative Anabaptists are collectivist in our mindset, we tend to interpret scriptures with a greater desire to keep our church systems stable than to restore individuals at risk. When we are more concerned with the reputation of our church or group than we are about the suffering of our victims of sexual abuse, we are not loving the church as Christ loved the church. We will do well to remember that we represent Christ better by serving and loving the oppressed than by refusing to get involved in hopes of having only the pure among us.

#### ***FEAR OF SECULAR INFLUENCE***

Metzger's fourth identified dynamic in our value system is our concern about secular influence when one of our members is needing counseling for sexual abuse. Conservative Anabaptism values the life of the believers in church community and one of our main lenses for lifestyle choices is to be "in the world and not of it." This phrase alone would indicate that followers of Jesus must withdraw from secular culture and all its teachings, but when we observe Jesus' interactions with his world, we witness more conversation than isolation. What if we could converse with professional counselors and social workers about our needs and questions rather than trying to hide our sins and failures from them? Most community social workers are dumbfounded at Conservative Anabaptists' refusal to seek outside help for sexual abuse victims, not because they don't believe that faith and prayer bring healing but because they understand that one person or even community rarely possesses everything needed for addressing trauma and mental health needs that remain ongoing for victims.

#### ***GENDER AND SEXUALITY***

Metzger points out that our language around sex and sexuality is often "ominous" (p. 48), often increasing victims' resolve to never speak out. Our Conservative Anabaptist teachings of modesty are connected to our understanding of being separated from the world, but shame is often part of our teaching too. The silence we keep in regards to sex and sexuality does not protect our people from sexual abuse – in contrast it heightens shame and fear, and lessens our ability to speak when lines are crossed and we are violated. Many Conservative Anabaptist victims (children and single or married adults) talk about how they didn't know that what was being done to their bodies was wrong or abnormal; instead, they assumed that their anger or fear toward the person who abused them was what was sinful and spent years trying to be free of guilt that was never theirs. Far more helpful than silence will be our learning to talk about sex and sexuality with clear and respectful language, building safe relationships for children and adult victims to ask their questions and share their stories where the space is supportive.

#### ***CONCLUSION***

Metzger has been gracious in her article. She has outlined informative qualitative research from values expressed and experienced in our written and first person resources, while recognizing that our literature does not represent the full spectrum of our views and responses to sexual abuse in our churches. In future research, consideration of the dynamics of collectivist culture to sexual abuse could also be helpful in understanding Conservative Anabaptist privatized responses to sexual abuse. Metzger's research can be "iron sharpening iron" for the questions we are asking of ourselves and the ministry we offer victims in our communities. We can continue learning about Jesus' Way and scripture's teachings while listening to the concerns of those who see us from the outside and are taking note of our blind spots.

## Response 2: Mark and Cindy Hochstetler

Our particular observations are based on our experience working with victims, offenders, and church leaders in the Holmes County, OH, Amish community as part of the Restoration Team and not personal experience being victims of abuse. Church structure in the Holmes County, Ohio, Amish community has some differences from what Metzger describes in the CMCO group she grew up in. Some important differences may exist in what we see:

- There is no written constitution or membership agreement. Each individual's commitment to the church is based on the vows at baptism.
- Published statements of the church are usually concerning faith, or position in a certain issue.
- Most church groups have verbal or printed guidelines for material things.
- Church leaders' authority is more limited. The bishop is leader of one district, which normally has 70-90 members, two ministers, and one deacon. The bishop cannot impose a new rule, or discipline a member, without the super-majority vote of all membership. When a bishop does not follow protocol, the membership can withhold the affirmative vote for communion for one year, which forces him to accept counsel from senior leaders from other districts, who are required to interview all of the membership.

Forgiveness is the most common point of contention for victims and their church leadership. However, we find that if the restorative process is explained to both parties, it is easily resolved. Our formula is simple:

- The victim is given unlimited time and space to heal. The victim is encouraged to communicate, either directly or by third party, to the restorative team with feedback on what is expected of the offender.
- The offender agrees to accept counsel in his life, to change the error of his ways, to be open to make restitution, accept

responsibility, and apologize at an accepted time.

- The church is to extend all resources for the restoration process.

We feel forgiveness for the victim—much like an apology for the offender—is important to their respective healing. However, neither part is to be forced, only guided in that direction.

The Holmes County, OH, Amish community is unique among Amish communities in several ways. Among those differences—and for this discussion—we point out that there are many different groups of plain Anabaptists, from very conservative Amish all the way to the Mennonites, all mixed together geographically. These groups have historically worked together for the mutual benefit of our community, including—in response to sexual abuse—establishing a Restoration Team to respond to cases of abuse. These team members are men and women from various church groups that form the core of the community (not ultra conservative or liberal).

The core church groups accept secular resources such as therapists, counselors, and psychiatrists for assistance; however, we are likely to be skeptical of non-conservative Anabaptist Christian groups, which are viewed as a threat to the church. Holmes County Amish community churches have mostly moved past denying the existence of sexual abuse, as a preservation of reputation, focusing more on teaching prevention, proper response, and assistance to all parties, in addition to restorative processes as proof of our commitment to the care of our members and dependents.

Silencing of victims is always a concern for us. Some victims say they were silenced by the church. However, it is more common for them to say they are not given the opportunity to speak in a way they were comfortable in sharing their true feelings and desires. If the Restoration Team is involved early in the case, this can be prevented by providing a safe place to talk. We simply point out to the church leaders that they need to focus their energies on helping the parties involved and teaching prevention. The stories we hear of victims being punished by the church are typically from old cases. We had one case where a third party whistle blower was punished by the church for seeking help for the victim in ways that were not sanctioned by the church.

