

Meghan Mast: *Meghan here. Before we get started, I wanted to let you know this episode deals with sensitive subject matter. We talk about abuse, including sexual abuse, and misuses of power. While no graphic details are included, take care while listening. And if you want to skip this one, that's okay too.*

Val Hiebert: *We think there's lots of distance between us in our communities and abusive behaviors, and there isn't. Abuse is present in some type or degree in almost every community in some way. And so that's I think probably one of the most important things people need to internalize is that abuse is happening. And it's happening to people, you know, even if you don't know about it.*

Meghan Mast: *That was Val Hiebert, one of MCC's Abuse Response and Prevention coordinators.*

Today on the show, we're talking about a difficult, but important topic.

Abuse.

And more specifically, abuse in the church community.

We'll explore how church culture can sometimes enable abuse, how to prevent it and how to best respond when it happens.

I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Meghan: *While it's uncomfortable to think about, abuse is happening in Christian communities.*

Whether or not it's being talked about.

A survey from Statistics Canada in 2018 found that four in ten women and a third of men have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime.

This is a silent pandemic from which the church is not immune.

In fact, the rates are higher amongst conservative religions, including Christian evangelical communities.

Jaymie Friesen and Val Hiebert, are doing what they can to lower those numbers. They are Abuse Response and Prevention coordinators for MCC in Manitoba and our guests today.

They teach abuse prevention through workshops, presentations and training. And they work with churches, families and individuals grappling with the aftermath of abuse.

These two women have a lot of practice having difficult conversations.

They're very knowledgeable about this work and I'm grateful to have them on the podcast today.

Welcome Jaymie and Val.

Val: *Thank you, Meghan, thank you for having us.*

Meghan: *To start with, can you explain what abuse is?*

Jaymie: *Yeah, so to give a very short, concise definition, I would say abuse is, or are our behaviors and tactics one uses to gain power and control over another. So it might not be the conscious intent of the*

person using abuse, thinking like, I'm going to do this thing because I want power and control. Often people aren't having those kind of like, conscious thoughts. But the impact and effect of abuse is that it violates one's dignity, their boundaries, and it takes away autonomy, it takes away choice and takes away someone's voice.

And to add to that, of course, abuse can have so many forms, right? So it can be spiritual, verbal, emotional, psychological, sexual, physical, financial, right? So there's, it takes many different forms.

Val: And people don't always realize that all of those forms are forms of abuse.

Meghan: *And that leads into my next question, which is, what are some common misconceptions that people have about abuse?*

Jaymie: Go for it, Val.

Val: Oh, there's lots of them. I mean, I think the most common one is simply, oh, that that person couldn't possibly be someone who's abusing someone. I mean, that's just, you know, or this doesn't happen in my church, or this would never happen in my family, or that's something that happens out there. Not in here.

Jaymie: I think too, there's a misconception or myth that like abuse happens in contexts where there's economic challenges, or people aren't educated or low income, right? So it's and, which is not not true, like people who are struggling with poverty are socio economic barriers, often, violence is present in those contexts. But that is not to say that those rates are exceedingly higher than they are other classes. It happens in all class backgrounds, I think though that oftentimes in like middle or upper class context, it's more hidden. Whereas when people are struggling with yeah, like I said, like poverty, it might be more out in the open. So then we think that that's where it happens.

Val: Because if you're living in an apartment, and the walls are thin, and everyone can hear it, it's more visible. When you're living in the suburbs, in your big 2,000 square foot house with your big yard. It is not as visible to the others around you. And then that feeds the stereotype that Jamie's pointing at.

Jaymie: Well, I don't know if it's a misconception, but I think a misunderstanding has to do around with the difference between abuse and conflict. And I think sometimes the church in particular, has conflated the two and we responded to abuse as though it's conflict, right. And there's a difference. So like, conflict is a power struggle. While abuse is power over.

So I think that's a really important distinction. And when I'm, you know, in a context where I'm supporting someone who experienced abuse, or they're trying to grapple with is what I'm experiencing in abuse. Some of the things you're assessing for are things like safety, both like emotional and physical. Are boundaries honored? Is someone allowed to have boundaries? Is someone able to express their opinions and their emotions without fear? Is there isolation? Right, like is someone allowed to be involved in community in their interests? And also like is there like mutuality in how decisions are made and how lives are lived? Right? So I think it's really important, especially for the church to understand the difference between those two, because we've sometimes advised individuals to go get help, as though it's a marital conflict, when actually what's happening is abuse. And how you proceed in those situations is very different.

Val: Because I've taught children violence, marriage and family, men and women in society for almost 20 years. And increasingly, had students come to me to talk about things that had happened to them in their churches, or their homes or their family gatherings. Wherever they were, when they actually heard all the different types of abuse that Jamie mentioned earlier, is when they realized that they themselves were actually, had experienced, or were currently experiencing abuse. And that that's hugely freeing to be able to say, oh, no wonder that's been so hard, or no wonder I can't seem to get over this or no wonder, because that was actually abuse, or that is abuse that is happening to me, in this context. You know, what, what grandpa does, or what my cousin does or what my youth pastor does, those are actually forms of abuse. So education and understanding are incredibly important as we try to get the word out there and hopefully start to reduce the number of victims out there.

Jaymie: And I think, too, that it's so incremental, like especially in the context of, let's say, intimate partner abuse, or even clergy abuse, like someone, you know, they don't go on a first date and experience abuse or violence, right? Or the first meeting with the pastor. Like everything's aboveboard, right? So it happens, whether it's grooming by a pastor, or just the slow progression of power and control that slowly develops. So many folks talk about like the frog in boiling water as an analogy of when they kind of recognizing, wow, like, their life has either become so incredibly small and controlled, or wow, like, what's going on here with this pastor?

Like, I don't want to be in this and this feels awful. And how did this even happen? Right? And then that's where that's often that self-blame, and shame comes in, right? It's like, How did I not see this? How do I let this happen? And I always remind folks, you know, like, this is not something you let happen, right? Like, oftentimes, someone was very calculated and manipulative. And you weren't allowed to have a boundary, right? Or I'll often ask the question, so what happened when you did have a boundary? And oftentimes, there are consequences. Maybe there was a threat, or there was more shaming.

Val: And it's really confusing, because very often, we experienced the abuse from someone we know and love, and have trusted. And it's very, very hard to actually even allow yourself to ask the question of that person that you care about, feel affection for, or trust, who actually does do some lovely things in your life too, to say, but, but this actually is feeling very bad. That is, crossing that boundary line is enormously difficult. Because there is authentic love and affection there. So it's just really, really hard, which is why so many folks don't discuss it. Because they feel like they're betraying that person. When in effect, actually, they are being betrayed.

And in a in a church context, let's say this is your youth pastor.

So not only is there genuine affection and respect and trust, this person also has the trust and respect of the broader community and the status inside of the community and you're just the lowly youth kid.

And this is the youth pastor. So if you add that dynamic in that power imbalance, this gets even more toxic and even more complicated.

Meghan: *I'm curious if you have any advice for how to respond, if somebody discloses abuse to you?*

Jaymie: Mm hmm. Well, yeah, I mean, I think the first thing is to resist our impulse to question it. We don't want to believe that harm is happening, right? And so I think sometimes our first gut reaction is to like, want to figure out is that really what happened or not? But here's the thing, oftentimes, when

people are disclosing abuse, they're not using that language, not saying, I'm being abused. Oftentimes, they're talking about what's transpired. And they're questioning it. That's often what I hear is people talking about experience, and they're filled with doubt about what, what just happened. Right? And I think one of the first things we can do is really affirm and validate that what someone's experiencing isn't okay, that that's an abuse of power. To help them see that they deserve to be treated with respect, and equality and mutuality. Right? So I think, oftentimes, before even believing it's sometimes it's about helping someone see that what they're experiencing, is a violation.

But yeah, if someone is coming forward and saying, you know, what, this person, you know, this person sexually harmed me, or they did this without my consent, I think we need to really, you know, believe and just affirm that it's not their fault.

I mean, this seems common sense, but like, listen, and learn more.

Right? We don't need to have answers, we don't actually really need to give advice.

And often that, again, is like an impulse is to like want to fix the situation, or what can we do right away, but I think it's really important that we listen, and then explore options and I say explore options, well what are even the options? And I think that's where it's important to connect with individuals who are kind of experts or who can offer someone avenues because there are different options, whether that's reporting or not reporting, whether that's getting counseling, whether like there's different paths one can take in terms of pursuing healing and justice. So I think it's important to support people in connecting with professionals who can help someone explore what their options are.

Yeah, Val, what else would you add?

Val: Well, that was all really well said. That moment is actually a watershed moment.

Jaymie: Mmmhmm.

Val: Because if in that moment, that the person who is doubting and, and trusting you with their confused feelings in their sense that something's wrong, and you lead them in the direction of questioning them and making them feel like, oh, yeah, I don't even know why I talked about this, I don't know, that sets them on a re-traumatizing trajectory.

And that's going to not, not only not help them, but it will generate further trauma for them, and will be much harder for them to ever try that again. And it leaves them more vulnerable to being further abused. Whereas if in that moment, that watershed moment, you take the other direction, and the person feels like, oh, this person is concerned about what's happening to me.

So I had a right to be concerned about this, I had a right to express my doubts and my fears and the icky feelings I'm having about this. It was, it was good and right that I talked about that.

And that can set them on potentially a better healing trajectory, and the ability to maybe start thinking, even if they're not using the word boundaries, to start thinking about protecting themselves more from the abuser. Because the person they told also didn't think that this was a good thing. So that that moment when someone reveals something to you has a sacredness to it.

That's really important that that sacredness be honored.

And how do we all try to be people in the world that someone looks at and says, Yeah, I can. I think I could tell her. I think I could tell her or I think I could tell him. All of the community has to work at this. We don't all have experts available to us. So who's going to be that person that will just, that we can trust?

Jaymie: Yeah, that's beautifully said Val. It's true that when someone's experience is doubted or disbelieved or minimized, like that is a moment when their trauma is compounded. In essence, we've actually added to the harm. And it is, it is incredibly pivotal moment, if someone shares and their experience is affirmed, and they come to see that what's happening to them is not okay.

Val: And one of the things that I think worries people is, well, what if what this person is saying is exaggerated or not even true. And now, I'm just contributing to these lies being spread about somebody else. And I remember, I remember you saying this to me, Jamie. And I thought, Oh, this is such good practical wisdom when, when I heard you say it, if indeed, that person is making something up, which is very rare, but we always, it's always possible, right? But it's very rare. That will show itself even if in that moment you choose, which I think is the right choice, which is to believe and support.

If it turns out that not everything was true, that will show itself.

So just take a breath, don't worry about that piece. And listen carefully and lovingly.

Jaymie: Yeah. And there's also some things not to do, I'm not a fan of like, "do not lists." I'd rather talk about what we can do. But maybe I should just say some things because I think there are some pitfalls that folks stumble into. Do not confront the person who's being abusive.

There is sometimes an inclination to go into the savior mentality, or I need to intervene. And it's just rarely a good idea period. But especially without the person's consent, there are situations where someone might say like, actually, I do want you to talk to whoever the person is causing harm. But I've seen situations go real sideways, when people start to intervene without consent without addressing safety, like sometimes that can really backfire and make the situation a lot worse for the person who's been harmed, because now the person abusing them, knows that they told somebody.

Another thing that I think is really important for folks to understand is couples counseling is very useful when it is marital conflict. And sometimes marital conflict can have violent moments in it. But if it's an abusive situation, couples counseling isn't rarely helpful.

Or there needs to be a lot more thought that goes into it, then, it's not it's not straightforward.

So those are two things. I just want to name, things not to do that I think sometimes we suggest or do with good intentions, like "Oh, couples counseling", or "oh, I'll intervene and talk to that person." Well, pause. And like, gotta discuss safety first. And is this going to be helpful and so on? And we didn't name this either. But if there are children, if there are children being harmed, it is we need to report that, right? That's part of the law in Canada that if there are children at risk, it needs to be reported. And that's something we didn't state, right?

Val: Yes. In Canada, if you don't report, you are actually subject to a very large, monetary fine, or even jail time. If you're aware of abuse happening to a child, and you do not report it. So, I think the only other exception Jamie would be when there's a power imbalance when it's a pastor and the victim and that still has to be victim driven. But that that pastor has to be removed from that position of power.

So when there is a power imbalance like that, then yeah, then other steps do have to be taken, but again, in consultation with the person who's been the victim of the situation.

Meghan: *That's really helpful. Now, I know that you both work with churches on both abuse prevention and also response. Can you talk about what churches can do to prevent abuse and create a safer environment?*

Jaymie: Yeah, there are lots of things. So, where to begin? But maybe first and foremost, and this is the one that probably like, for me isn't the most exciting, but it's really imperative is around like policy. So having good safe church policies and these policies should not get in the way of creating community, I know sometimes folks are like, "Oh, these policies can feel oppressive." And that's not the intent. The intent of good policy should really be like really practical guidelines for how do we ensure that those working with vulnerable people are safe to be doing that, and we need to be honest and recognize that like, people will seek out churches and communities where there are no policies and where they have access to vulnerable people. So our church, we, we do need to be diligent with that.

And that's been my experience, too. Like oftentimes when a church has a leader who has been violating boundaries, sexually, oftentimes, they have a track record of it, they've come from another church. And that church did not do proper screening on that pastor, they were just maybe overly trusting. So I think good policies is one thing that we can do to prevent.

Val, do you want to add some things?

(Laughs) That's one, but there's many more.

Val: Yes, I mean, if you walk into a church building, and there are signs up for who to call, if there's a domestic violence situation, or you don't feel safe, or for awareness for kids who are able to read already, you know, if these kinds of things are happening to you, you should call or you should talk to, you know, up in the bathrooms or in the lobbies, or. That already signals that the church is aware that these things happen, and that they can happen inside of a church community. And that there are places you can call and you will be believed, all of those things are present, as soon as you visually put a few things up in your church. It's also a great idea for churches to give either, you know, Adult Formation Sunday school time, or actual sermon time to, to talking about these issues, because they are significant issues that are happening inside the church, and we surround it with an extra level of silence. Because churches are supposed to produce these super extra healthy families. And so there's even more pressure on church families to look good, which silences victims even further.

So any way that a church can on a regular basis, say okay, now it's November.

What are we going to do this November to acknowledge violence in the home and abuse in the church? And what will we what we say or do this year, like just that alone, every year, at least once, there will be something.

Jaymie: Yeah, yeah, I think the education piece is so key, right? Like we were talking earlier about how so many times folks don't realize that they're in a situation of abuse. And I think the church has not historically done a good job of helping people understand what are healthy boundaries? What are, oh, yeah, the different between healthy boundaries and healthy boundaries of abuse, no conversation about what consent and respect and mutuality looks like in a sexual relationship. It's just, don't have sex

until you're married. But we don't actually learn what ah, how to put it? Like what a truly respectful, consensual relationship looks like. And so I don't think our young folks are necessarily equipped with good ways of navigating relationships in a way that treats the other as sacred.

And I think too, when it comes back to, you know, pastoral misconduct, lots of pastors, I would say most have not been trained in relational ethics, and how to navigate some of the challenging aspects of being a pastor. Without that training, we can all any of us if we were in that position would probably end up causing harm because we are in a position of power. And we probably don't even recognize the power we hold. And we're in constant relationship with people who are either vulnerable or looking to us for counsel and advice. So as pastors and leaders, we really need to learn how to steward that position well.

Val: And pastor's labor is often exploited. I mean, pastors burn out, because they're supposed to be everything to everyone, and they're sort of on call 24/7. And so, you get burned out, fizzled out, tired pastors, and then they have no boundary training. And they're not aware of how their power is operative. And you start adding all of those contributing factors and suddenly, you've got a pastor, who may not be an intentional predator, but is now a wanderer, which are terms that Marie Fortune uses. So, wasn't someone intending to do harm, but in the millieu of all those things going on—no proper understanding of their power, no proper boundary training, way too stressed. And being a pastor is not easy because you're never in a place where everyone's happy with you. And then suddenly, you find yourself having your needs met in a relationship that's becoming increasingly exploitive. And that's a wanderer.

Jaymie: Unacknowledged power plus unacknowledged needs is a recipe for a boundary violation.

I think another thing that churches and leaders can do to prevent or really raise awareness about abuse with which is part of prevention, is to make sure that, you know, scriptures and themes or, that are being taught or preached are nuanced for, for situations of abuse, right. So if we're talking about forgiveness, for example, are we nuancing that through a victim-centered lens? For example, I'm preaching at church next week on the passage about turning the other cheek. Jesus is not inviting people to be a doormat for abuse in that text. But sometimes that very text has actually been used, ironically, to perpetuate violence. So yeah, how do we really nuance passages and offer a proper trauma-informed victim-centered lens through which to talk about them? I think that's a thing that all preachers, teachers can be doing to help raise awareness.

Meghan: *Yeah. Wow. And there's probably so many examples of that if we were to think about other scriptures, or yeah, sermon topics that are used. So I know, prevention is a big part of what you do. But you also counseled churches, on response. When a church reaches out for help on how to respond to allegations of abuse, how do you advise they handle the situation in a way that best protects victims?*

Val: This is totally a Jamie question.

Jaymie: *(Laughs)* Well, I want you to chime in. So the first thing that comes to mind is to bring in an external person who has experience walking with churches through this type of thing.

I think there is often a impulse for churches to just kind of figure this out on their own, probably in part because they feel embarrassed or ashamed. I think one of the wisest things a church can do is to bring in external consultants to help them walk through it, because the reality is when a situation of abuse comes to light in a community, especially when it's by a leader, that's traumatic for everybody, including

those who are now supposed to lead the church through this. So everyone's in a trauma response and a fear response. And that's never a good place to lead from. And so, I'm a big proponent of getting a third party to come in, who isn't in a trauma response, who can help ground the community and help leaders know what the next steps are. So now you're probably wondering like what some of those next steps are?

Well, and again, this is a situation where hopefully, you have some good policies and procedures that you can follow. And it depends it depends on who's the person who was harmed and who the person was experiencing harm. So, again, if, if there's disclosures of pastoral abuse, I mean, the a policy should say that that person is put on a paid leave and there's an investigation. That's just best practice.

But I think what we're really, especially as a Christian community, what we really want to bring attention to is the people who have been harmed, what are they needing? Whose responsibility is it to meet those needs? Some of these are restorative justice questions, right? And, yeah, who can meet those needs? So, again, hopefully good policies, outline some of the options and ways that needs can be met. But I think those are some first steps.

Val: It's also important that we understand that restorative justice, which is what Jamie's talking about, doesn't imply that we want to restore the relationship of the victim and the perpetrator.

Restoration is about restoring the victim, and finding out what the victim needs, what they do want what they don't want. It also means trying to restore the perpetrator. And that's, that's a separate thing. And then also the community, because the community, as Jamie has already inferred, is going to need a lot of restorative work, because trust has been broken in all kinds of ways. And some people will be refusing to believe the victim. That's usually the problem. So restoration is, is not about trying to get those two people back in a relationship, unless that's something the victim wants, but typically, they don't.

Jaymie: Mmm hmm. And when it comes to how do you respond to the person causing harm? Again, I, it depends on who they are. But I often think about, like the degree of power imbalance and the degree to which the person's taking responsibility. And those two things inform what consequences might look like, because there are consequences when someone engages in abuse, right? Like, it's not okay for a pastor to keep their job in a position of power, if they have abused that power. Like that's just a consequence. That's not about being punitive. And I think that oftentimes, the church will look at that and be like, how could we, you know this pastor's reputation has been ruined, their whole life has, you know, has collapsed? And it's like, well, actually, the victim's lives have been crushed by this experience. They're the ones now that will have to work for, I don't know the rest of their lives on a healing journey.

Val: And I think that this is actually a natural consequence of having abused your power. This isn't a church discipline. This is just a natural consequence. You used your power to harm someone. So now we have to take the power away, that is a natural consequence. And then, of course, if the if there's a child involved, that it has to be reported.

Jaymie: And back and back to how you respond to those who've been harmed, I mean, it's really about honoring autonomy and control, right? Because that's the very thing that's been taken away from them. And so how do we really listen well, and respect the needs? And my experience has been that oftentimes those who have been harmed, they're not on a vendetta to try and take down the person

who abused them. They might get to that. But typically, the reason they get to that is because they've been disbelieved, and their needs haven't been met earlier. And oftentimes the needs that from most of the individuals I support has been for culture change. They want better policies, they want better education, they want the system to change in some way.

And that's about me..., that's, that's about meeting a need for justice, right? So can we listen well and actually, as a community, help meet those needs? And that's, that's a way that we as a community can help with the justice and healing process, and in the process, hopefully change ourselves in a way that creates safer, more whole communities.

But yeah, I think division in the community when abuse comes to light, especially by a leader is inevitable. I don't know if there's a way around it. I've never not seen division in a community where there's been abuse by a leader. And I think it's can be helpful to frame it or see it as like a natural also a natural trauma response. When we think about how trauma impacts collectives or groups, oftentimes the blaming. What's, what's the term I'm looking for ... the us/them? Yeah, the us/them mentality. That's often natural trauma, fear response. And I think sometimes even just naming that for communities can almost soften that a bit. It's like, oh, this is a natural thing that happens when there's been trauma in the community.

Meghan: *You've already touched on this a little bit, but I'm curious to hear you go a little bit more in depth. How do you think church culture factors into these scenarios?*

Val: Ah, well, I mean, there's a whole range of what purity culture looks like in different denominations and different churches. But because historically the church doesn't, because they want you not have sex until you're married, we, we surround everything up until that point with silence.

And in our current cultural context, we have this silence, and all we want to talk about is don't do it. So we don't recognize we actually need to talk about healthy sexual identity and development in order to be ready to be a whole person entering into a sexual relationship at the point of covenant.

And in our current context, where somewhere between 60 to 70% of evangelical youth are sexually active at some point in their early or late teens or early adulthood, which I think most churches either I don't know if they don't want to know that, or if they just don't know that. But that's what's happening.

Jaymie: I think the churches are an opportunity, maybe I'll put this way to really help especially young men to become, you know, more whole and more well-rounded. I think there is, you know, we have a history of socializing men to be how do I put it to be masculine in pretty unhealthy, toxic ways.

How can the church help challenge some of those scripts? Right? And how can the church help young guys to recognize what healthy relationships look like out that it is okay to be vulnerable to express emotions? Right? And I don't know Val, do you want to like share your story about your class that you're recently teaching? And what?

Val: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I teach at the University of Manitoba, and I was teaching a lecture on Gender Socialization. At the end of the class, I asked this pop question. And I simply asked them each to say, of the ways in which you were gender-socialized, which thing did you like the least? Or did you push back on the most? And one of the really dominant themes in that class from the male students was the ways in which they had been forced, never to show emotions of sadness or fear or confusion because that

wasn't male, that wasn't masculine. And many of them were overtly taught, you know, boys, don't cry, don't be a baby. And so what you have is boys growing up into men who don't know anything about their own internal emotional geography. So they don't know how to identify what's going on inside of them, because we actually told them not to even think about it, and just ignore it and not feel those things. Because if they did, and they weren't being a proper male, and now we have an entire generation of men who don't have those skills.

And it's, it's like, abuse is a strong word, but I feel like that is kind of emotionally abusive, to teach our boys that they can't feel sad or afraid or confused or not have the solution to a problem. Because they're men.

Jaymie: Yeah, and I mean, I'm a believer that unacknowledged emotions or emotions that have been like repressed pain, trauma that's been repressed right. If men have no place where they can take their pain, and their difficult feelings, it will come out sideways. And that's what we're seeing it comes out in violence, right? So if we really, really want to prevent abuse, which is predominantly perpetrated by men. Of course, any gender can cause abuse and harm, if you have power, right? But if men are the main people causing harm, like what's going on there? So if you really actually want to prevent, we have to spend time and energy actually helping men heal too from this emotional, I would call it emotional oppression. I don't know if that'd be a fair term?

Val: Yeah, that is a fair term.

Meghan: *My last question is, do you have any stories that you can share about churches that have handled allegations of abuse in a way that was healing?*

Jaymie: Hmm. I mean, ultimately, I don't know if I'd be the one that could decide if it was healing or not. Right? So I want to be cautious about that. But I will, you know, I can share a story. And from my perspective, and from some of the feedback I got, I think it was handled maybe...

Yeah, um, it was messy. It's always messy, by the way, it's not ever not messy. Mistakes were made, I think mistakes will always be made in these types of processes. So um, this is not a story of like a church who did it all right, they made mistakes, and it was messy, and there probably will be people who say it wasn't healing. But I was really, what really struck me and I was really quite compelled by was that the same week that disclosures came to the surface. So this is a situation of a fairly large church and with many staff, and several female staff came forward and disclosed the sexual misconduct they had experienced.

And within that week, the leadership of the church reached out to our program, which I think already is so significant. Because so often, we get, we might get a call a year or two later, when the church is still struggling. And by then there's not a whole lot that we can offer. So they reached out instantly. And the pastor, as soon as they wanted to investigate, he just left and quit. So that that often does happen a pastor will just resign and leave, which makes it very challenging to do a proper investigation.

So what, what we did instead, is, one of my suggestions, and to get this was not solely my idea, this is very collaborative, but we offered that all staff could connect with myself and a therapist together. And so if they had been violated or if they had been, or were impacted, it was an opportunity for them to talk about what was going on for them what it was like for them to disclose and essentially it was a place, a safe place to talk confidential. That wouldn't.... How do I say this?

Yeah, like we're not, we weren't connected with the church, right. So they had freedom. And but they also knew that part of this conversation was that it would inform a report that we were going to write for the church around things like: what had happened, what they could have done better to prevent the situation, what were next steps for moving forward in terms of changing culture, culture, and creating a just and healing way forward, especially for those impacted. So they knew that what they're sharing, it wasn't just, oh, we're giving you a space to talk. It was like we're giving you a space to talk. But this is also going to inform how we move forward as a congregation. So I think in the end, we spoke with, I don't know, eight staff members, many who had experienced violations, some who were just really distressed. And after that, we wrote a report, it was 10 to 15 pages long. And that church, I feel like they really took that on. And they shared that whole report with the whole congregation, which I was floored by. One of the one of the things I said is that we'll write this report, but I want all the victims to see it first, before anyone else sees it.

So that was part of the process. And yeah, I don't think it was perfect. But it was a way of really listening and hearing and validating experience, especially when an investigation, the kind of investigation that was needed probably wasn't really, we weren't able to, they weren't able to do that in the ways that they needed. But this was a creative alternative.

I'll say this, it took a lot of time and energy and commitment on behalf of that church. And money. Like a lot of resources and time was invested in this process. And I think they're still mobilizing it. And this was several years ago already. Right? So I think that's an important thing for churches to understand is there's no quick fix. It's a long journey that takes like I said, it takes time and energy and devotion, and good external support.

Like the external support thing is imperative. Because I think too those leaders would say like, and they told me this too like that they really needed help navigating it. And I also think that it takes a great amount of humility to be able to say, as leaders, like we can't do this alone, and I don't think any leader can do it alone. But yeah, there's a level of humility to say, we can't do this. And we need help. And that is a strength. And I really have a lot of admiration for this church because of how they handled this case. So I share it as an encouragement to other churches.

Meghan: *That's super helpful, I think. And hopefully, there's people listening, who can take some of these bits of advice and experience and apply it to their situation. Well, thanks for, for being on the podcast and for sharing your expertise. And also, thank you for the very good work that you're doing in church communities.*

Jaymie: Thanks, Meghan.

Val: Yeah, thank you. Thanks for featuring. Yeah.

Jaymie: Oh, sorry.

Val: Yeah, thanks for caring about this. Thanks for featuring us.

Meghan: *That was Jaymie Friesen and Val Hiebert, Abuse Response and Prevention coordinators for MCC in Manitoba, Canada.*

MCC has several resources on abuse prevention and response for churches or for people who are supporting someone through an abusive situation. I'll include these in the show notes.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was produced and hosted by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks and take good care.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

SHOW NOTES:

A guide for church leaders about abuse response and prevention:

<https://mcccanada.ca/media/resources/1343>

What does abuse look like and what can you do? <https://mcccanada.ca/media/resources/1342>

Understanding sexual abuse from a church leader or caregiver: <https://mcccanada.ca/media/resources/1340>

MCC abuse response and prevention: <https://abuseresponseandprevention.ca/>