

## After sexual violence

### What happens next in the community of grace?

Carol Penner

**W**hat happens when a woman from your congregation goes to a shelter for abused women? What happens when a church member is asked to leave his home, because the Children's Aid is investigating allegations that he sexually abused his stepdaughter? What happens when a sixteen-year-old in your congregation is pregnant after she got drunk at a party?

Sexual violence is a reality in congregations. The details vary, but the violence is taking place. What happens next? How does the church respond?

Let's use three stories to help us understand how churches often do respond.

#### Amy and Brad

Amy and Brad joined the church soon after their marriage. Brad was a gregarious man and became one of the trustees of the

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church. Amy was quieter. After she had three children in three years, she didn't always come to church. Brad sometimes shared with the men's group that Amy was depressed and often got angry with the children. He brought them to church, and he always seemed loving and attentive to them. Amy was repeatedly invited to women's activities, but she usually had an excuse. She didn't talk much about

her situation at home, and she looked unhappy. When people inquired, she mostly talked about being tired. At one point she was hospitalized for a week, but no one quite knew why, and neither Brad nor Amy seemed to want to talk about it.

Then Brad came to the pastor and asked for support. Amy had gone to a women's shelter with the children. Brad broke down and cried, "I don't know what to do. I can't even see my children." He

talked about “mental health issues” that his wife was facing, and revealed that her hospitalization the previous year had been the result of a suicide attempt.

News of Amy’s move to the shelter, which one of the deacons shared with a few people as a “prayer request,” rumbled through the congregation like a thunderbolt. Everyone wanted to know what had happened. The pastor and a female deacon went to visit Amy at the shelter. They heard a different story: Brad had been violent with her for years, often forcing her to have sex against her will. She loved Brad but was afraid of him.

The pastor confronted Brad with Amy’s story. Brad denied the violence and maintained that his wife’s mental instability was the problem. He told a couple male friends from church that he had concerns about his wife’s fitness as a mother.

Amy’s story was not widely known in church. At her request and out of respect for her privacy, the pastor and deacon maintained confidentiality. Brad continued to attend church, so Amy never came with the children. The pastor referred the couple to a professional marriage counsellor, but after a few sessions the process broke down and Amy filed for divorce. A few people followed up with Amy, but she and her children gradually drifted out of the consciousness of the congregation. Then Brad started dating another woman in the church. The few who knew Amy’s story wondered, “What do we say? What can we say?”

### **Jessica, John, and Rachel**

When Jessica was nine, her mother—Rachel—married John. Everyone in church was happy for this newly formed family. Jessica was a happy girl who was busy and active in school and church activities.

When Jessica was twelve, her personality seemed to change. Her marks dropped, and she withdrew from activities. If they thought about it, people in the church chalked Jessica’s behaviour up to the beginning of the “troublesome teenage years.”

Then one day Jessica confided to a friend that her stepfather was being investigated by the Children’s Aid and that he was living in a hotel and wasn’t allowed to talk to her. “I’m glad,” she said. “I hate him. He’s never going to tell me what to do again.” The friend spread the information to others, and soon many

people in the church were speculating that John had been physically abusive toward Jessica.

The pastor also heard this story, and he contacted John, who did not return his calls. Rachel was initially evasive, but when the pastor told her what he had heard, she was angry. She said, "John has never been violent with Jessica." She explained that John had shown Jessica sexually explicit pictures he had on his computer. He had told Jessica he wanted her to know "the facts of life."

After blurting this out to the pastor, Rachel said, "Don't ever tell

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Jessica I told you. I promised her I wouldn't tell anyone. She is so embarrassed about it." Rachel also asked the pastor not to tell anyone in the church about John's problem with pornography.

In conversations with John, the pastor heard a different part of the story. John assumed the pastor knew that the investigation had started because Jessica had talked to a teacher. She was upset because she thought

her stepfather wanted to take pictures of her. John seemed defensive as he told the pastor that he had only asked, "What would you say if someone asked to take pictures of you? You're a very beautiful young woman." John said she made an assumption because she saw he had a camera on the desk. "It was all just a misunderstanding," he said, "My wife understands, and we're working on our marriage." John asked the pastor to hold everything he said in confidence, because they needed privacy to work on their marriage. John was hurt and confused that people in church didn't seem to want to talk to him or Rachel.

The pastor was in an awkward place. He wondered whether he should have agreed to maintain confidence on this matter. He knew misinformation was circulating in the church, but he had no one's permission to share the story. At first he was relieved to learn that John had not touched Jessica and that the situation was not as bad as he had feared. But the more he thought about it, the more disturbed he was that John had used his sinful pornography habit to sexualize his relationship with his stepdaughter. He wondered whether John might be a threat to other children in the church. How could he or the community support Jessica if they

weren't to know what had happened? He knew that the family was going for counselling through child protection services. Should he just leave it at that?

### **Breanne and Tyler**

Breanne and Tyler had been dating for a month. They were from neighbouring towns and both were active in local congregations. They attended a few youth events together, and then Tyler invited Breanne to a party at the home of one of his friends. A few days after the party, Breanne and Tyler split up.

Two months later, Breanne's parents were shocked when Breanne told them she thought she might be pregnant. In tears, she said that she had drunk quite a bit of punch at the party she'd gone to with Tyler. She hadn't realized how much alcohol was in it until she started to feel sick. She went to lie down in a bedroom, and when Tyler came to see how she was, he had started kissing her. She was a virgin and she hadn't wanted to have sex, but it all felt like it was happening to someone else.

Breanne's mother took her to the doctor, who confirmed the pregnancy. The parents went to talk to their pastor. They were considering calling the police, because they felt their daughter had been raped. Because she was drunk, she hadn't been able to give consent. The pastor volunteered to talk to Tyler and his parents. Tyler and his parents were upset by the use of the word *rape*. Tyler admitted that he had had sex with Breanne, but he said it was mutual. Then Tyler said, "I wasn't the only one who had sex with her." Apparently one of Tyler's friends had sex with Breanne that night as well.

Breanne's parents spoke with the police. They were hesitant to press charges, because they were worried about how a trial would affect Breanne's life. Breanne didn't want all her friends to know what had happened. She felt terribly guilty that she had gotten drunk, but she also felt terribly used.

Breanne and her parents were facing a big decision about pressing charges, and then the call came from the doctor. He was recommending an abortion. Breanne had confided to the doctor that at the party she had taken a pill that someone had given her. She didn't really know what it was. She was worried that it might have hurt the baby. In principle, Breanne's parents were against

abortion, but in these circumstances they were rethinking their position. Breanne and her parents faced this whole situation in isolation from their church. No one in the congregation knew what had happened, except that Breanne had gotten drunk at a party.

### **On further reflection**

In principle, most people would say that sexual violence in marriage is wrong, that child sexual abuse is wrong, that date rape is wrong. As congregations, we want to show our support to survivors of violence. We believe that congregations need to hold perpetrators of violence accountable.

Sexual violence in intimate relationships, whether between husband and wife, or parent and child, or boyfriend and girlfriend, is rarely simple. These stories have been related in enough detail to cast light on how complicated sexual violence in the congregation often is. In a complex situation, where the story involves people we know, clear principles tend to become murkier. Let's consider these stories.

The first story initially seems straightforward. A woman goes to a shelter with her children because of violence in her home. Shouldn't the congregation give unconditional support to the survivor of violence? Shouldn't the congregation hold accountable the man who has offended?

Brad and Amy's story is typical of many episodes of sexual violence, in that the church community is not privy to a full account of what has happened. Brad and Amy have their versions of the story, and they both have reasons for wanting to share or protect their side of the story. Brad is able to mobilize support quickly. The congregation is splintered as people take sides, offer support, and judge one another for how they give or withhold support.

Brad ends up staying in the church, while Amy and the children leave. The pastor would have needed to take leadership to ask whether she would like to attend her church with her children. If she wanted to attend, Brad could have been asked to find another church home. Under those circumstances, the pastor and other people could have tried to maintain contact with Brad, but the public worship space would have been safe for Amy.

In Brad and Amy's story, mental illness is a factor that skews the congregation's response. Mental illness carries a stigma, and Brad's story may seem more believable because Amy has been hospitalized after a suicide attempt. The people who hear Amy's story may wonder, "Is her story reliable, or is it the product of a troubled mind?" People may feel sorry for Brad because he has had to live with someone who is depressed. This is a story that includes mental illness, but in other stories other factors—such as skin colour, socioeconomic status, or cultural background—may affect a congregation's perceptions and actions.

Some in the congregation feel torn between Brad and Amy, so they focus instead on the children. What is best for them? In this situation, Amy is not bringing the children to church and has taken them to a place where their access to their father is limited. Church members observe this choice in light of Brad's suggestion that Amy is an unstable mother, and they remember the loving way they have seen Brad acting toward the children. This combination of elements may influence their support for Brad, who wants the marriage to continue, and their judgment of Amy as she files for divorce.

Personal dynamics also play into congregational response. People don't know Amy well, while Brad is gregarious and apparently open. And he continues to attend church. This bias toward Brad is furthered when Amy withdraws from church. Amy's decision to go to a women's shelter adds another barrier. None of the people in the church have been in a shelter, and they are unsure about how to contact Amy, or about whether they are allowed to call her. "Out of sight" soon slides into "out of mind."

Jessica's story also raises questions. Again the congregation's picture is incomplete. They have some information, but it isn't accurate information. The congregation judges John, because they think he has been physically abusive toward Jessica. They show that judgment by withdrawing from him.

The pastor enters the situation as a spiritual leader on behalf of the congregation. He is a pastor to John, to Rachel, and to Jessica. The pastor does not have the parents' permission to talk to Jessica, and in any case, the fact that he is a man may make it awkward for him to talk with her. The pastor has internal conflicts about confidentiality issues, and he also has concerns about safety.

In no time, he gets ensnared in the web of secrets around John's sinfulness and is relieved to hand the sticky situation over to professional counsellors.

In the final story, the congregation is totally in the dark about the violence that Breanne suffered. Again the family is protective about their painful story. If Breanne had been raped by strangers as she was walking down the street after school, her parents might still have chosen to protect her story. But the fact that she was raped by her boyfriend at a party, after she had been drinking and taking drugs, leaves her open to the judgment of the community.

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The congregation might not view what happened as an assault. They might judge the parents for being too permissive. If Breanne has an abortion, she and her parents will have even more reason to hide her story from the church.

Most people would say categorically that date rape is wrong, but certain circumstantial factors may change the way the congregation feels about the situation. If they found out, for example, that Breanne was not a virgin, that she had slept with her boyfriend the previous week, would that change their view of what happened? What if Breanne's parents weren't church members? What if Breanne's

mother was an exotic dancer? What if Tyler was the pastor's son? Alternatively, if Breanne is white and the congregation learned that Tyler and his friend are African American, how would that change the community's response? How would it affect her parents' decisions?

In principle our congregations want to be supportive communities and we don't want to blame and abandon survivors or those who offend, but in the hurly-burly of congregational life, with its whirlwind of personal and societal prejudices, we can quickly lose our way.

### **What happens next?**

How can churches be communities of grace for those suffering from sexual violence? Here are some guidelines:

***Love in the cloud of unknowing.*** A congregation never knows the whole story of sexual violence, and it does not have the right to know the whole story. Still it needs to be a community of grace to all involved. At times we need to withhold judgment, examining our prejudices in the bright light of God's love. We also need to be realistic about people's sinfulness. We cannot be naïve but must instead be both wise as serpents and innocent as doves. People need to be held accountable, and at times we need to prayerfully put safeguards in place to protect people who are vulnerable. We need to comfort the broken-hearted, whether they are on the giving or the receiving end of violence.

***Love as the medium we live in.*** People's stories about violence need to be treated with the utmost care. Before we pass along anything to anyone, we need to ask ourselves, "If this story were about me and my family, would I want someone else to be spreading it?" The congregation is like a Petri dish; stories can grow and multiply with remarkable speed. We need to be careful to nurture a medium of love and grace, or we may find ourselves growing something very nasty indeed. Some stories should be carefully safeguarded, but at other times we must be cautious in order to avoid being manipulated into keeping unhealthy secrets.

***Love beyond halos and pitchforks.*** It would be so much easier for congregations if survivors of abuse were perfect people with no flaws, and people who offend were mean and unlikeable. But that is rarely the case. Just like the disciples in the story of Jesus's healing of the man born blind (John 9), we need to get beyond our initial question—who sinned?—and figure out how to be a community of grace to flawed people. Unfortunately, even the community itself is flawed; we will make mistakes as we try to be supportive. We all have to rely on God's grace.

***Love for the lost lambs.*** Sexual violence leaves destruction in its wake, and people can fall through the cracks. It is the congregation's responsibility to reach out to everyone involved. We cannot require people to come to church, and at times it is best for all involved if they attend different churches. But congregations can continue to be supportive, showing concern and love to the survivor as well as to the person who has offended. A card or note, a willingness to talk, an invitation for lunch, practical support in the form of paying for counselling or dropping off



meals, are all ways that congregation members can show they care. Everyone needs prayers for healing.

***Pastoral love with professional help.*** In situations of sexual violence it is important to involve professionals. Few pastors are trained to deal with the manipulation that people who commit sexual offences are skilled at, or with the deep pain of those who have been violated. But professionals cannot provide a supportive community. The congregation should continue to acknowledge the long, painful journey, not just assume that professionals have taken over. For the congregation to say and do nothing communicates: “What is happening to you is not important to us. We don’t care what you’re going through.” And organized care is more effective than a vague hope that someone is staying in touch.

***Loving the broken community.*** As was the case in the stories above, sexual violence mostly stays below the radar of the congregation. It’s important to preach and to pray about this type of violence, because it is present in every community. In our churches we need to name the fact that we are tempted to commit violence in our intimate relationships. We need to name rape and abuse as realities from which we are recovering. We can use rather than ignore the difficult passages in the Bible that speak about sexual violence. We can celebrate the gift of sexuality and our commitment to treasuring each other’s sacredness.

When sexual violence comes to light in our congregations, the impact can feel like an earthquake. People we trusted no longer seem trustworthy. Families that have appeared intact for years are seen to be deeply fractured by sin. People start to disappear through the cracks. How can we be a light on a stand, or a city on a hill, if everything is falling apart? This is when we need a God who holds all things together. It is not by virtue of our spotless lives that we become a community of grace but by our reliance on a God who helps us as we patiently and lovingly gather up the pieces of our broken community, our broken world.

### **About the author**

Carol Penner has worked as a sessional lecturer, chaplain, and freelance writer. She is currently pastor of a small Mennonite church in Vineland, Ontario, where she lives with her husband Eugene and two teenage children. The stories in this article are fictional, but they resemble the stories of many women and men whose lives have been affected by sexual violence.