

Activism in a Mennonite Voice

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A Kudzu Landscape²

Introductory Comments

During the drive here from the airport on Thursday evening, I was reminded once again that clergy sexual violence and morally corrupted institutions both resemble Kudzu.³ For those of you who do not recognize Kudzu, the Washington beltway was lined with it. It is an invasive vine that smothers and kills all other plant forms in its path. It must be aggressively and persistently managed to control its invasive and noxious presence.

Who are these Mennonites?

We Mennonites are the twentieth-first-century descendents of the 16th century Reformation Anabaptists. In many ways we are neither Catholic nor Protestant.⁴

In the sixteenth-century, our faith ancestors represented a radical divergence from both groups as early as 1530 or 1540. Roman Catholic *and* Protestant princes and priests hunted down, imprisoned, and killed our ancestors.

Our principle differences in belief from the Christian majority include: (1) adult confessions of faith and adult baptism; (2) a radical separation of church and state; (3) a refusal to carry or use the nation-state's weapons; (4) communitarian discernment; and (5) discipleship – faithfully following in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth.

Today, our Anabaptist faith family represents more than 1.7 million baptized believers from 83 world nations. Approximately 2/3 of these are African, Asian, or Latin American.⁵ Thus we are multi-colored, multi-gendered, and represent many of the world's language groups. Our international church's official languages are English, French and Spanish.

The Mennonite Church USA represents approximately 98,000 baptized members.

We are one of Christianity's historic peace churches and our witness to the power of nonviolent, serving love has gone around the world.

Yet, inside our communal lives, we are interpersonally violent in multiple ways. Clergy and religious leader sexual abuse, incest, rape, domestic abuse, child sexual abuse, and spiritual abuse are all common. A small recent survey indicates that perhaps 1 in 5 Mennonite Church USA adults have been victimized by abuse and violence.⁶ The majority of these victimized individuals are women and their children.

During the last week in July, 2015, the worldwide Mennonite church gathered in PA and in early July, 2015 the United States Mennonite Church met in MO. The problem of sexual abuse inside our worldwide communities was raised and addressed in both gatherings. SNAP-Menno was present at both as were representatives of other concerned Mennonite organizations.

This is a marked change from the summer of 1990 when I wrote an essay about family ethics for the Strasbourg World Conference of Mennonites which was held in France. In that essay I described and discussed the epidemic of family violence inside Mennonite communities. The editor of that collection was extremely displeased with me about the content of my essay. At the time there was internal dissent about including my concerns for this worldwide celebratory gathering of Mennonites. But the short essay was eventually published.⁷

To my knowledge, this was the first time – in a denomination-sponsored publication – that the worldwide Mennonite church was officially put on notice about the nature and quantity of affinity violence in the Mennonite world.

Who are God's People?

In light of Pope Francis' metaphor about *clerics needing to smell like their sheep*, we need to ask the question: "who are God's sheep today?" We can extrapolate from the ancient prophet Ezekiel in Jewish scriptures and make a reasonable conclusion for the twenty-first century:

The sheep in God's contemporary flocks are those who have been plundered by their political and spiritual leaders. The people of SNAP – in this room and around the world – are, therefore, the people of God. Today's religious leaders have danced on your backs, raped your bodies, mis-appropriated and mis-spent your money, wounded your spirits and force-marched you into emotional, social and spiritual exile: thus, you know the evils of corrupt, organized religion in intimate ways – in your bodies and in your souls.⁸

Informed Activism

I think that informed activism about religious institution corruption in any and all of our various denominations looks remarkably similar.

These patterns of ecclesial corruption – including the idolatrous sacrifice of children on God’s altars for institutional, sexual, political, economic, religious and personal power - were known to the Hebrew prophets and they were known to Jesus. Today they are known by every one us in this room.

My Conclusions

As a sexual violence activist, I have absolutely no doubts about two things:

These denominational sexual violence narratives are a pandemic reality – a world-wide phenomenon present in probably all religious and spiritual communities. The world-wide situation is worse than the flu pandemic of 1918 and this problematic behavior has been going on for millennia.

Secondly, the religious *and* the spiritual consequences of sexual violations in a religious context are serious ones. For my purposes today, I will call them *child and adult spiritual attachment disorders* or *child and adult religious attachment disorders*. Benkert and Doyle name them *religious duress disorders*.⁹ Freyd names them *betrayal trauma*.¹⁰ Winell names them *religious trauma syndrome disorders*.¹¹ The American Psychiatric Association DSM 4-r simply called them religious problems and spiritual problems.¹²

Whatever language we use to describe it, it is now clear: there is a religious trauma component *and* there is a spiritual trauma component in our human response to these forms of institutionalized violence.¹³

This kind of analysis leads me to two conclusions:

(1) Because of its pandemic nature and because of its serious health and social consequences, the phenomenon of sexual abuse inside religious communities needs the attention of the public health sector of our nation and the world.

Since the religious hierarchy will not volunteer what they know about incidence and prevalence data, we need a public health alliance to gather this data for us. We need the assistance of the Surgeon General of the United States and the research assistance of the National Institute of Mental Health.

(2) Those of us in this room with theological, spiritual direction, pastoral, and clinical degrees (and perhaps the lawyers as well) need to begin planned meetings around conferences such as SNAP. We need to extend our stay by 1-2 days so that we can work together in a concerted and deliberate effort to map what we know about religious trauma and spiritual trauma. Our purposes here are quite simple: (1) to build the body of knowledge that can support informed activism on behalf of victimized individuals and (2) to develop appropriate spiritual and clinical support services.¹⁴

We are, for God's sake, our various churches' theological, pastoral, spiritual, and clinical voices. If we don't do this work, it won't get done.

¹Endnotes

For more information about Dr. Krall, see www.ruthkrall.com

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Egan, A. N. (April, 2014). China Expedition 2013: A Tale of Typhoon-tossed Kudzu. *Plant Press* 17(2), April, 2014. Retrieve information about this essay and photograph at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History at http://nmnh.typepad.com/the_plant_press/2014/05/china-expedition-2013-a-tale-of-typhoon-tossed-kudzu-by-ashley-n-egan.html

³ Krall, R. E. (2014). Chapter Two: Sexual Violence is the Kudzu of Christianity (pp. 26-29). *The Elephants in God's Living Room, vol. 3, Bearing the Unbearable: A Collection of Conversational Essays*. Enduring Space: www.ruthkrall.com

⁴ Klassen, W. (1973). *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*. Canada: Conrad Press.

⁵ <https://www.mwc-cmm.org/>

⁶ Kanagy, C. 2006 Church Member Profile. Doves Nest. Retrieve from <http://www.dovesnest.net/CAN>

⁷ Krall, R. E. (Summer, 1990). Family Ethics. *Mennonite World Conference Handbook*, Strasbourg, France/Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press

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Ezekiel 34: 1-10

⁹ Benkert, M. and Doyle, T. P. (2009). Clericalism, Religious Duress and its Psychological Impact on Victims of Clergy Sexual Abuse. *Journal of Pastoral Psychology* (58), 221-238.

¹⁰ Freyd, J. J. (1996). *Betrayal Trauma: The legacy of forgetting childhood abuse*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Winell, M. *Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS)*. Journey Free: Resources for Recovery from Harmful Religion. Retrieve from <http://journeyfree.org/rts/>

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Lukoff, D. (1998). From Spiritual Emergency to Spiritual Problem; the Transpersonal Roots of the New DSM IV Category. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 38 (2), 21-50. Retrieved April 14, 2011 from <http://www.spiritualcompetency.com/hpseart.htm>

¹³ Kelman, Herbert C. and Hamilton, V. L. (1989). *Crimes of Obedience*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. See also Shupe, A., Ed. (1998). *Wolves within the Fold: Religious leadership and abuses of power*. Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

¹⁴ This is the way that the original work for the PTSD diagnosis developed in the 1970's era when returning Vietnam Veterans and their advocates lobbied for better Veterans' services and when American women were lobbying for better management and post-rape interventions in the United States legal and clinical systems. See Herman, J. L. (1997). *Trauma and Recovery: the aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

See also Kreisler, H. (September 21, 2000). *The Case of Trauma and Recovery: Conversations with Judith Herman, M. D.* Berkeley, CA. Institute of International Studies of the University of California at Berkeley. Retrieve from: www.globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/herman/; See also Bessel van der Kolk's discussion of the politics of the proposed diagnosis *complex post-traumatic stress disorder* in Van Der Kolk, B. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the healing of Trauma.* New York, NY: Viking Press.