



# **Forgiveness and reconciliation in situations of sexual assault**

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## Introduction

*The publishing of this Occasional Paper coincides with the adoption this month of 'procedures for use when complaints of sexual abuse are made against ministers'. The Commission on Women and Men is acutely aware that the Procedures are only one step in addressing the many injustices that victims of sexual abuse in the church experience.*

*For many women, the experience of sexual assault is compounded by abusive attitudes, theological assumptions and structures of the church. The church must begin to address the many ways it perpetrates violence against women.*

*Rev Dr Peter Horsfield identifies one such area. He argues that the church must begin to struggle with what forgiveness and reconciliation really means in the context of a relationship where there has been betrayal. We must hold in tension our belief in the healing power of true forgiveness and the need to respect a victim's feelings and experience. We must also shed our naivety about the abusive nature of perpetrators.*

*In pressuring, even coercing victims of sexual assault to forgive and forget we make a mockery of grace. This cheapens the integrity of the woman, it cheapens the integrity of the church and ultimately it cheapens the God of Justice and Compassion whom we proclaim.*

*We welcome Dr Horsfield's paper, which was originally given at the first national conference on sexual violence in faith communities held in Melbourne, 1993. Our hope is that this paper will contribute to the on-going process of the Uniting Church becoming a place of safety and healing for survivors of sexual assault, rather than a place of fear and betrayal.*

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## The question of forgiveness

People who are survivors of sexual assault frequently grapple with the issue of whether and how to forgive the one who has assaulted them. The advice they receive in this struggle is frequently of little assistance in linking together the actual experience of assault with the expectation of forgiveness.

It is the contention of this paper that our thinking about what human forgiveness means has become confused, amoral and urgently needs clarification. In particular, our thinking about forgiveness has been separated from a moral and theological framework that is essential if it is to have meaning. Pastoral theologian, Don Browning affirms the importance of this framework:

*“Without assuming the seriousness of the demand of Christianity for ethical inquiry and conduct, forgiveness loses its meaning and its renewing power... It is only against the background of the tenacious concern to define in practical ways and with great attention to detail the meaning of the law that the gospel of forgiveness has power.”<sup>1</sup>*

Christian forgiveness in situations of sexual assault requires a number of essential prerequisites: protection and restoration. Of the dignity and integrity of those who have been violated; effective structures for ensuring the safety and protection of the vulnerable; a clear affirmation of ethical expectations for fair relations between people of inequitable power; and the enforcement of legal and moral standards. Without these things being present, forgiveness degenerates into a simple condoning of evil and perpetuates the violence.

Church leaders who have to act or minister in cases of assault, or who have to deal with complaints of assault within the church, have a responsibility to ensure that those ethical requirements are satisfied in how they deal with such situations.

## The importance of truth-telling

Achieving forgiveness and reconciliation is frequently presented as the highest Christian aspiration in conflict situations. Where the wrong that has been done is not acknowledged or rectified, however, the desire to achieve reconciliation frequently results in minimising the damage or compromising the truth.

Liberation theology, which speaks from the perspective of the victims of oppression, affirms that reconciliation must always be reconciliation in truth, otherwise reconciliation simply perpetuates oppression by supporting the status quo or making the weaker party give in to the stronger party.<sup>2</sup> Similarly liberation theology does not talk about forgiveness without also talking about liberation and justice for those whose voice is silenced.

An essential requirement in forgiveness and reconciliation, therefore, is naming and telling the truth. A reconciliation based on evasion or avoidance of the truth is no reconciliation. Deliberate efforts to prevent the victim's truth being told, or making the truth seem more complex or uncertain than it really is, is an extension of the original violence and a common device used by perpetrators to protect themselves.<sup>3</sup> Onlookers' desires to remain "balanced" or "neutral" play into this dynamic.

Having the truth of what happened acknowledged and being able to speak about it has been found to be critical in recovering from trauma. As in situations of bereavement, it is a crucial part of the recovery process for a survivor of assault to be able to remember what happened, reconstruct the trauma story, and talk about what happened.

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This makes a nonsense of the common idea of “forgive and forget.”<sup>4</sup> A person who has been assaulted can never, and should never, forget. Even if she succeeds in shutting the experience out of her conscious mind, the experience will be re-remembered by her body as feelings of not being safe, dirtiness, worthlessness, or depression until they are properly dealt with. The process of remembering and telling her story, at times over and over, is essential in reconstructing intellectually and psychically the sense of self, worth, and safety which has been smashed or damaged through the assault.

This need for truth-telling as a basis for recovery from assault frequently conflicts with the tendency within our churches to keep undesirable things secret, to have things settled and over with as soon as possible, and to present the church as a happy place. These pressures work against survivors of assault finding in the church a genuine redemptive community.

There are several dimensions to this truth-telling. One is the importance of clearly naming what has happened. This provides a necessary basis for identifying what has happened, rectifying it, and establishing a foundation for individual and corporate recovery. The process of recovering from assault is hastened immensely when there is a clear acknowledgment that wrong has been done and action is taken by appropriate authorities to put that wrong right. As with individual assault, research is indicating that clearly telling the truth, with appropriate discretion, and providing people with the opportunity to talk about it is the best foundation for congregations which have experienced abuse by leaders to recover from that abuse as well.<sup>5</sup>

A further aspect to truth-telling is the freedom to express distrust. Central to the truth of sexual assault is the experience of distrust. If you have been terrorised in sexual assault, or betrayed by the sexual abuse of a trusted clergyman, the feeling that people cannot be trusted is not pathological - it is a very accurate and healthy response to real, traumatic experiences of terror and betrayal. Yet unquestioning trust is generally seen in most Christian traditions as the only basis for relationship with God - those who are distrustful are generally seen as having problems with their faith. There are very few opportunities within our religious traditions to give positive expression to religious attitudes of distrust. Rabbi David Blumenthal, writing from within the Jewish tradition, notes, "Given Jewish history and family violence as our generations have experienced them, distrust is a proper religious affection and a theology of sustained suspicion is a proper theology to have."<sup>6</sup>

This situation needs to be redressed if survivors of assault are to find within our Christian communities the freedom to be truthful about what has happened and its consequences. The church can respect this distrust by having clear and enforceable standards of ethical behaviour for its leaders, effective and open processes of accountability for maintaining those standards, and restoring trust by paying for restitution when those standards are abused. It is critical also that in processing complaints against church leaders, church bodies be as open and informative as possible about the processes being followed. Legal settlements which bind a survivor of assault to silence, while serving well the institutional interests of the church, also sabotage the basis of a survivor's ongoing recovery, and should be avoided.

## Ethical conditions for forgiveness

Another idea that needs to be challenged is that Christian forgiveness is somehow unconditional, to be given without any strings attached. The idea is also expressed that forgiving people before they repent will actually make them repent by the overwhelmingness of the love they're being shown.

God's forgiveness is not unconditional. Undeserved, yes, but not unconditional. The Bible makes very clear that God sets conditions if we are to have a relationship with God. Specifically, God expects personal and social standards of faithfulness and justice. If, as individuals and as a society, we ignore those expectations of faithfulness and justice, God does not "forgive us anyway" - God's love is expressed as judgment and condemnation. Otherwise who God is and what God expects would count for nothing.

In the same way, Jesus was not the all-forgiving person we sentimentally make him out to be. Particular examples of Jesus' forgiveness need to be seen in context and balanced against others. Jesus uncompromisingly told the truth, even when it offended people. He named and criticised evil and called to account those who abused their power. He confronted his enemies both privately and in public and called them names like vipers and sons of hell. Jesus didn't trust his enemies. As Mary Pellauer has whimsically noted,

*"Jesus may have loved his enemies, but he didn't have a meal with them after the resurrection."*

Quoting particular passages on forgiveness from the Bible needs also to take into account the strongly ethical context which those passages assume and which give them their structure and meaning, a perspective highlighted by writers such as Don Browning and Fred Keen.<sup>7</sup>

Christian forgiveness and reconciliation are not unconditional - otherwise forgiveness would simply be a condoning of evil, and reconciliation would take no account of the importance of truth and give no protection to those who are vulnerable. That is why, whenever the gift of forgiveness is given in the Bible, it is always preceded by the conditions of confession, repentance and restitution.

Without such ethical conditions being present, forgiveness is inappropriate, even if it is seemingly given voluntarily. For instance, several years after she was gang raped at the age of 14, a woman recalled, "I forgave them immediately. I felt like it was my fault that I'd been raped. I said, well, they're men. They just can't help themselves."<sup>8</sup> In this case to permit this young woman to forgive would be to support her view that she was of no worth and that the men were not responsible for what they had done. To endorse or encourage such unethical forgiveness is an acquiescence in the face of destructive evil and an exploitation of the vulnerability of victims struggling to recover from severe trauma.

Support groups for survivors of clergy assault, such as Shivers in Melbourne and Friends of Susanna in Sydney, speak of instances where victims are pressured to forgive their clergy assaulters so that the matter will be resolved and the church won't have to take disciplinary action. Whether to forgive for what has been done to her, and whether the conditions are such that she can, is a matter for the woman to decide. Whether the church decides to forgive a leader who abuses his office - for the damage done to the Christian community, the trust of society, and the office of the ministry, for which they are responsible - is something other church leaders have to decide.

Offering "cheap grace" in these situations does nobody a service. Whether the woman forgives or not, I consider the church should be unforgiving of the minister until the crime or abuse of pastoral ethics has been clearly acknowledged and owned; the damage done to the victim, the congregation and the public office of the ministry has been thoroughly

identified and rectified; and the church is certain that similar offences will not occur again. In the past the church has frequently treated the seriousness of this lightly - the possibility of being called to account in the courts is causing many churches to re-examine whether previous "generosity" has been appropriate.

## Forgiveness as the end of a long process of recovery

A third dominant idea that needs to be questioned is that forgiveness is the Christian way of putting things right when things go wrong. The idea here is that by a sheer act of will or conscious choice, a woman who has been assaulted can make up her mind to forget she has been assaulted and carry on again as if nothing has happened. Hence the advice survivors commonly receive, "it's time to forget what's happened and get on with your life."

Forgiveness is wrongly understood as an immediate thing that sets a victim on the road to recovery. Forgiveness is something that may happen at the end of the long, hard process of recovery, according to its own timetable, and then only if the appropriate conditions for forgiveness to occur have been fulfilled. It is important to stress this, for too often survivors find that in addition to dealing with and recovering from the effects of assault and injustice, they are pressured by others to forgive their assaulter, long before it is appropriate, long before they are ready, and generally long before the wrong that has been done to them has been acknowledged and remedied.

Victims of assault are often urged to forgive for many wrong reasons.

**Church leaders** often want things settled as quickly and easily as possible to avoid a scandal, to avoid disruption to institutional programs, to suppress conflict, to spare them from having to confront a powerful person, to avoid possible legal action, or to avoid facing up to the injustice in the church's own structures.

**Church members** can also put pressure on victims of assault to "Forgive and forget" quickly because it makes them feel uneasy, they don't want to keep hearing about something that's unpleasant, and they find it difficult to handle the emotional responses and the hard practical and faith questions those who have been assaulted begin to ask.

**The victim** may also want to forgive too quickly as a way of bargaining for mercy from the assaulter or of avoiding the full implications of what has happened to them. Such "fantasy" forgiveness can put off or sabotage the necessary and painful process of remembering and acknowledging the damage that has been done, grieving what has been lost, redrawing the boundaries of one's self, and becoming reconnected to others again in a way that incorporates this new life experience.

Many survivors of assault find they cannot forgive, not because they don't want to, but because the injustice and trauma they have experienced which has terrorised, degraded, and diminished them has never been acknowledged and never been put right. We have tended to explain this resistance to forgiveness by branding the woman as a vindictive or unforgiving person. But there are other ways of seeing this. It is not that the person refuses to forgive, but the ethical conditions which are essential if forgiveness is to be possible, have been denied them.

The result is that survivors of assault and injustice are placed in a situation where they cannot forgive without either denying their own worth or truth, giving in to the violence, denying the value of that which has been violated, or dehumanising their assaulter. When a survivor of assault refuses to forgive, therefore, it is frequently the only way they have to resist the evil that has been done and an expression of love. It is also the same thing that God does when God judges - God also sometimes is unforgiving.

Unfortunately, though we often talk about forgiveness within the church, very often by the way we deal with things attempting to suppress conflict, not making judgments, keeping things secret, not enforcing the ethical conditions we talk about, not holding the powerful accountable - we actually create a situation that stops people from being able to forgive.

## Repentance

Forgiveness requires clear confession and repentance on the part of the one who has done the violence. There are several reasons why confession and repentance are necessary.

**Confession and repentance clearly name what has been done as wrong and place responsibility for the wrong squarely on the shoulders of the one who has done the violence.** This is essential for the victim to be able to distinguish clearly the nature of what has happened to her and to have clear moral perspectives or which to begin dealing with it. It is also critical in our society where women are socialised to believe they are responsible for men's sexual and social behaviour and encouraged to believe they are responsible for their own assault.

**Confession and repentance are necessary for reaffirming and restoring the integrity and trustworthiness of the moral structures of good and evil by which we are encouraged to live.** Confession and repentance, therefore, are very important factors in setting things right. How they are expressed, however, needs to be appropriate to the nature and seriousness of the situation.

Sexual assault is much more than just a disagreement to be resolved by conciliation or discussion. Sexual assault is a crime, an experience of terrorism. Marie Fortune notes, "Being forced sexually against one's will is the ultimate experience of powerlessness, short of death."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the sexualising of a pastoral relationship is much more than just a dubious affair or lack of judgment: it is a serious breach of pastoral ethics, a betrayal of representative trust and an intrusive exploitation of the intimate relationship between a person and God. Pamela Cooper-White describes the consequences as the stealing of one's soul.<sup>10</sup>

Appropriate confession and repentance for such behaviours needs to be more than is required for simple misunderstandings. Confession and repentance must be equal to the damage that has been done. In the case of violence and pastoral sexual abuse, confession and repentance must include at least the following: acknowledgment of the full consequences of what one has done; deep and sincere regret at the damage done to the victim and to others (including, in the case of pastoral abuse, the congregation); acceptance of full responsibility for causing and for rectifying the situation; and acceptance of the disciplinary consequences of having betrayed one's position of trust and power. If the effects of the abuse are public, then the confession, repentance and restitution must be sufficiently public to establish an unambiguous basis for reversing those effects. Given the important ethical functions that confession and repentance perform, it is a scandal how little and how undefined the church expects and permits repentance from perpetrators of violence against women to be.

**Genuine repentance cannot be coerced.** The words of repentance can be coerced, and are frequently used by perpetrators as a form of damage control. Unfortunately, the church is often too eager to accept just words of repentance rather than withholding forgiveness and walking with offenders through the long hard steps of responsible repentance. One of the things that strikes me is how much over the years we as clergy have failed ministerial colleagues known to be abusing their positions, by feeding them "cheap grace" instead of holding them accountable for their behaviour.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most difficult things the church faces now is working out how to discern and deal with perpetrators of violence who refuse to acknowledge and accept responsibility for their violent and unethical behaviour. This is only recently being recognised as a serious problem. We have tended to assume that men, including clergy men, are basically good and will tell the truth. Recent findings, however, are indicating how common, how profound and how clever is denial (lying) on the part of male perpetrators, including male clergy. Judith Herman, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard University, gives a stern warning:

*“Genuine contrition in a perpetrator is a rare miracle In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defence. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalisation. After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.”<sup>12</sup>*

What is the church to do in this situation? I believe we are not prepared, practically, theologically, or in terms of personal or institutional courage, to confront such blatant or subtle denial in our own community and deal with perpetrators of violence who are able skilfully to muster support or sympathy to protect themselves. Yet we must do so. Because the church presents itself as a moral community, and commends its leaders as trustworthy, it has an obligation to discern and censure those in positions of power who betray that trust. At times that involves decisive moral and administrative action in situations where it would be easier to do nothing. Violence is a situation where one cannot remain neutral - to attempt to remain neutral is to take the side of the perpetrator.<sup>13</sup>

It is wrong to seek to resolve situations of violence by urging or expecting those who are violated to forgive and be reconciled. Those in positions of authority must fulfil their responsibility of naming and confronting evil, calling the powerful to account, paying for restitution, and re-establishing a clear and lair structure of justice for the recovery of victims and of accountability for the recovery of perpetrators.

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<sup>1</sup> *The moral context of pastoral care*, p 102.

<sup>2</sup> Lourdino Yuzon, quoted in Andrew Geraghty, Reconciliation doesn't stop at personal level," *Crosslight*, November, 1992, p 31.

<sup>3</sup> This point is strongly brought out by theologian Robert Schreier in *Reconciliation: mission and ministry in a changing social order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).



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<sup>4</sup> The phrase "forgive and forget" is actually a Shakespearian quote, not a biblical one: (King Lear, IV: vii). The close biblical parallel in Jeremiah 31:34 "I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more" has a specific context and needs to be considered against other OT and NT passages which talk about God's judgment and severity in the face of abusive behaviour.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Larry Kent Graham, "Healing the congregation: the dynamics of a congregation's process of recovery from its minister's sexual boundary crossing with parishioners," (Unpublished report - Graham is Professor of Pastoral Care at Iliff School of Theology) and Nancy Myer Hopkins, "Symbolic church fights: the hidden agenda when clerical trust has been betrayed," *Congregations: The Alban Journal*, (May/June 1993).

<sup>6</sup> "Who is battering whom?" *Conservative Judaism* 45: 3 (Spring 1993) pp 86 \_ 87. Some writers have noted the absence in Christian spirituality of the opportunity to express other emotions, such as lament, a recurring theme of the Psalms.

<sup>7</sup> Fred Keen, in a recent article on forgiveness in the New Testament, notes that in NT society there was a clear protocol that a person of lesser power could not forgive a person of greater power \_ they were not in a position to do so. Keen notes that victims of assault cannot forgive their assaulters until the power imbalance between them has been reversed and the woman feels empowered to the point where the man is no longer a threat to her. ("Structures of forgiveness in the New Testament," Unpublished paper). Pastoral theologian Don Browning draws attention to the strongly moral context within which Jesus and Paul lived and spoke a context which needs to be taken into account in understanding the meaning of what they said. (*The moral context of pastoral care*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976, p 43).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to be a man: essays on sex and justice* (New York: Meridian, 1989) p 20.

<sup>9</sup> Marie Fortune, *Sexual violence: the unmentionable sin* (New York. Pilgrim Press, 1983), p 7

<sup>10</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, "Soul stealing: power relations in pastoral sexual abuse," *The Christian Century*, February 20, 1991, pp 196-199.

<sup>11</sup> A view reflected also in Carolyn Heggen, *Sexual abuse in Christian homes and churches*. (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1993) pp 124-5.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and recovery* (New York. Basic Books, 1992), p 8. Pastoral psychologist James Newton Poling also speaks of the seriousness of this denial. One of his chapters is co-authored with a survivor of violence. Of the other he says, "I have been unable to co-author a chapter with a perpetrator because I have found none with the courage to speak the truth about his life in public. James Newton Poling, *The abuse of power: a theological problem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p 52.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Herman says, "All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain... Working with victimised people requires a committed moral stance... a position of solidarity with the victim. This does not mean a simplistic notion that the victim can do no wrong; rather, it involves an understanding of the fundamental injustice of the traumatic experience and the need for a resolution that restores some sense of justice. (Ibid, p 135). Herman says this in relation to the traditionally morally neutral profession of psychiatry. How much more does this apply to churches which supposedly have a strong moral commitment to the powerless and marginalised?