

A Witness to the World: Congregations Where We Don't Abuse Each Other

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Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak at this conference, I am so honoured to be here, and thankful to the Academic Development and Research Fund of Conrad Grebel University College which supported my presence here.

In Canada, it is customary to make a statement before events to acknowledge that the land on which we live and work is treaty land, taken from Indigenous peoples. The institution I teach at is on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Attawandaron(Neutral), and Anishinaabeg peoples. This territorial acknowledgement signals a commitment to working towards Truth and Reconciliation in word and deed with First Nations.

In this presentation, I want to focus on what's at stake when we fail as churches to confront the pervasive problem of pastoral sexual misconduct in the church. We have to attend to sexual abuse by church leaders not simply to protect victims, but to actually protect the larger mission of the church. Radical renewal must include keeping our own house in order.

I will illustrate this point by reflecting on a case study from my Canadian context. The largest Anabaptist church in Canada was called "The Meeting House": it closed its ministry last year because of the fallout from pastoral sexual misconduct. Its collapse is not just a cautionary tale, it provides direction about the path ahead for all our churches.

Case Study

The Meeting House started in 1986 as a church plant in Oakville, Ontario sponsored by the Brethren in Christ denomination (this denomination is now called "Be in Christ"). This congregation experienced dramatic growth fourteen years later when it hired Bruxy Cavey as their new minister.¹ People flocked to hear Cavey's dynamic teaching sermons, which often stressed the love of God. Cavey provided a uniquely Canadian and in some ways lowkey approach to evangelicalism. He was self-deprecating and ironic, often using humour in his sermons.

In particular, his message appealed to Christians who had left the church. In Canada, that is a large audience to draw on! Canada, like many parts of Europe, has seen an increasing secularization of the population. In 1946, 67% of Canadians attended a religious service—in 2020 only 11% of Canadians attended weekly services.² That decline has continued through the pandemic.

¹ It was originally called Upper Oaks Community Church. In 1996, ten years after it started, it had 100 members when it hired Bruxy Cavey. Schuurman, *The Subversive Evangelical*, 12. He renamed it The Meeting House in 2000. Rachel Browne, "The Meeting House: Inside a Megachurch Scandal" *The Walrus*, March/April 2023. <https://thewalrus.ca/meeting-house/>

² Rick Hiemstra, "Not Christian Anymore," *Faith Today*, January 8, 2020. <https://www.faithtoday.ca/Magazines/2020-Jan-Feb/Not-Christian-anymore>

Bruxy Cavey's message resonated with an audience that was jaded about Christianity.³ In fact the byline of The Meeting House was "church for people who are not into church."⁴ He took aim at religion, which he said was too legalistic and judgemental. Cavey focussed instead on the forgiving love of Jesus.

The Meeting House developed an effective method of church growth. When it grew too large for its building, they expanded with satellite campuses. They rented movie theatres, which are usually empty on Sunday mornings, and broadcasted Cavey's sermons.⁵ On the movie screen, Cavey became literally a larger than life figure.

In addition, The Meeting House had a website where they posted recordings of Cavey's sermons. In 2020 they had just under 10,000 livestream views of the sermon per week; this brought many to the church.⁶

At its peak, The Meeting House had 19 satellite campuses spread over 400 kilometers with over 5000 people attending services. They had sixty staff and a budget of \$11 million dollars a year.⁷ The main church itself was in a converted warehouse in Oakville, with a 1200 seat auditorium, and the technology required to professionally broadcast Cavey's sermons.⁸

The wider church took note of the success of The Meeting House, and Bruxy Cavey was a sought after speaker in evangelical circles. He was one of the main session speakers at the 2015 Mennonite World Conference in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He was a guest instructor at many institutions, including my own.

Part of Cavey's critique of evangelicalism was that pastors had too much power, so he created a shared leadership team, a very Anabaptist concept. He gave up being the senior pastor, and took on the role of teaching minister. He had a board of elders that ran the church. There was "Be in Christ" denominational oversight.⁹ However, Bruxy Cavey was the charismatic leader at the centre of the whole organization—he was the public face of the church.

In 2008, a youth minister in The Meeting House, Kieran Naidoo, was asked to resign from his position, because another youth minister found explicit sexual images of one of the youth group members on his computer. The church paid for marriage counselling for Naidoo after his departure. No one in leadership called the police, and no attempt was made to find victims and help them.¹⁰ Most people in the church had no idea why this youth leader was no longer on staff.

³ Bick and Schuurman attribute this decline in connection to the church to failures of the church. Angela Rietsma Bick and Peter Schuurman, *Blessed are the Undone: Testimonies of the Quiet Deconstruction of Faith in Canada*, (Saskatoon: New Leaf Network Press, 2024), p. 7.

⁴ Schuurman, *The Subversive Evangelical*, 11.

⁵ Schuurman, *The Subversive Evangelical*, 13.

⁶ The Meeting House (September 25, 2020) *The Meeting House 2020 Annual Report (pdf)*. Accessed March 12, https://www.themeetinghouse.com/static/pdfs/annual-reports/2020_Annual_Report_combined.pdf

⁷ Meagan Gillmore, *Toronto Life*, March 27, 2023. <https://torontolife.com/deep-dives/how-meeting-house-megachurch-preacher-bruxy-cavey-groomed-young-women-for-sex/>

⁸ Over 200 small groups (which they called home churches) met during the week to discuss his teachings.

⁹ Cavey did not try to micromanage all aspects of the church. He did not monetarily profit from his ministry, driving a Honda Civic and continuing to live in a modest bungalow even when the church was at its peak. Rachel Browne, "The Meeting House: Inside a Megachurch Scandal" *The Walrus*, March/April 2023. <https://thewalrus.ca/meeting-house/>

¹⁰ Rachel Browne, "The Meeting House: Inside a Megachurch Scandal" *The Walrus*, March/April 2023. <https://thewalrus.ca/meeting-house/>

Naidoo went on to work in youth ministry in other churches, and in 2012, he was charged with sexual exploitation, possessing child pornography and invitation to sexual touching. He was convicted in 2014 and sentenced to three and a half years in prison. Two of his victims have filed a civil suit against The Meeting House, suing the church for damages.¹¹ The Meeting House survived by minimizing this horrible story, and because Naidoo was not someone many people in the church knew.

Then in 2021, an official complaint of sexual misconduct against Bruxy Cavey was received by The Meeting House. The Board of Overseers hired an external investigator, who found the complaints had merit. Cavey was asked to resign, and he did. The church made a public statement saying that Cavey's conduct had amounted to sexual harassment and power abuse. In a blog post on his personal website, Cavey described what he had done as a moral failing and an "extramarital affair."¹²

The victim of Cavey's abuse and her advocate found The Meeting House and Cavey's characterization of the abuse as sexual harassment both minimizing and hurtful.¹³ In a statement on a victim advocate website, the victim wrote, "This began during a pastoral counselling relationship when I was 23 and he was 46. I was in crisis and trusted him, and I did not, nor could I, consent to a sexual relationship with him."¹⁴ Cavey had pressured the victim to keep the relationship secret, providing theological reasons why God allowed it, calling her a gift from God to him.¹⁵ The sexual abuse continued for over four years.

The news rocked The Meeting House, and so they hired an external victim advocate. She received 38 reports of sexual misconduct that involved four pastors.¹⁶ Three complaints against Cavey were substantiated, one concerned a minor.¹⁷ Cavey's credentials as a pastor were revoked by the Be In Christ denomination. Months later, the church did declare that what Cavey did was pastoral sexual misconduct.¹⁸ Eventually, after deep soul searching of their history, the Board of Overseers acknowledged that there had been a pattern in their church of "prioritizing the care and well-being of offenders over victims," describing multiple stories where victims "felt shamed and rejected by the church, while the offender was supported through so-called restoration."¹⁹

¹¹ Rachel Browne, *The Meeting House Megachurch Faces New Lawsuits*. March 21, 2024. <https://thewalrus.ca/meeting-house-lawsuits/>

¹² Morgan Severeid-Bockneck, *The Spectator* (Hamilton, Ontario), July 23, 2024.

¹³ Brendan Kennedy, "Oakville Megachurch Reveals New Sexual Abuse Allegations Against Former Pastor Bruxy Cavey" *Toronto Star*, August 13, 2022.

¹⁴ Victim of Bruxy Cavey's abuse, <https://www.hagarsvoice.com/raiseyourvoice>

¹⁵ Although her name was protected by The Meeting House complaint process, the victim faced harassment for coming forward, including a video on YouTube that revealed her identity and accused her of trying to destroy the church. Rachel Browne, "The Meeting House: Inside a Megachurch Scandal" *The Walrus*, March/April 2023. <https://thewalrus.ca/meeting-house/>

¹⁶ "The Meeting House Closes." *Canadian Mennonite*, 11, 2024, 36,

<https://proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/meeting-house-closes/docview/3130913642/se-2>.

¹⁷ Rachel Browne, "The Meeting House: Inside a Megachurch Scandal" *The Walrus*, March/April 2023. <https://thewalrus.ca/meeting-house/>

¹⁸ They used the definition of misconduct found on Mennonite Central Committee Canada's website. I contributed to that section of the Mennonite Central Committee website. This highlights how important it is for board members to understand the dynamics of pastoral misconduct. As they educated themselves about it, they realized they had been misinformed earlier.

¹⁹ June 7, 2022 meeting of The Meeting House, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOypJQmumEM>. Melodie Bissell resigned her position of victim advocate in 2023, telling a reporter that while The Meeting House initially showed a strong commitment to victims, "eventually reports of misconduct had to go through The Meeting House staff rather than straight to her."

Three months after Cavey's resignation as pastor, three criminal charges were laid against him.²⁰ One of the charges against Cavey was eventually stayed²¹ and two other charges were withdrawn."²² Civil suits against The Meeting House by several of the victims of Kieran Naidoo are still pending.

After the allegations and investigation of pastoral abuse, many congregants felt disillusioned and betrayed not only by Bruxy Cavey but also by The Meeting House leadership. As is typical in churches where pastoral sexual misconduct has happened, many people left the church. Those who stayed faced conflict in the church over how the abuse was handled. Financial giving was drastically reduced. The Meeting House closed almost half of its satellite locations because they could not afford to rent the space and pay the staff.

And then in July 2024, The Meeting House issued a statement saying that it was suspending operations because it had been unable to obtain abuse insurance and employee liability coverage from any insurance company.²³ As insurance companies regularly continue to insure organizations that have had complaints against them, one speculates that The Meeting House was so remiss in following its own policies that they were considered uninsurable.²⁴

Reflection

Church leaders throughout history have regularly sexually abused those in their care, and the abuse has almost always been ignored or minimized. The church kept rolling along in spite of the victims it was rolling over. Victims blamed themselves for the abuse, and others blamed them for it too. Victims who spoke out were gaslighted and shunned. They either left the church or suffered in silence. But the world is changing. The future will be different.

I want to draw attention to five factors that can and will change how victims are treated in the church. The first is internal to the church, and the following four are external factors and beyond the church's control.

The first factor is our theology. For all our talk of peace in Anabaptist churches, when abuse has happened, we have usually ignored or silenced victims in order to preserve the reputation of the church. We have idolized leaders, believing they were too big to fail. Our theology is now changing towards protecting victims and holding those who abuse accountable. And our theology must address the way our churches are being damaged by patriarchy. Pastoral sexual abuse flourishes when women are not allowed to be church leaders. The vast majority of victims

²⁰ "How to Dismantle Abuse in the Church." *Toronto Star*, Jan 06, 2024.

<https://proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/how-dismantle-abuse-church/docview/2910806414/se-2>.

²¹ The staying of one conviction happened after Cavey's lawyer successfully argued that his client's right to a timely trial as guaranteed under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was breached. The Crown attributed the delays to the ripple effect of the COVID-19. Morgan Severeid-Bockneck, *The Spectator* (Hamilton, Ontario), July 23, 2024.

²² The Crown determined there was "no reasonable prospect of conviction." "Charges against megachurch pastor Bruxy Cavey withdrawn." *Toronto Star* [Toronto, Ontario], September 5, 2024, 1. *Gale OneFile: CPI.Q* (accessed May 4, 2025). <https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/apps/doc/A807433579/CPI?u=uniwater&sid=bookmark-CPI&xid=ea7ad0cf>.

²³ "The Meeting House Closes." *Canadian Mennonite*, 11, 2024, 36.

<https://proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/meeting-house-closes/docview/3130913642/se-2>.

²⁴ At the same time as they announced the closure of The Meeting House, a new initiative called the "BIC Church Collective" was launched that included former locations of The Meeting House and lead clergy of those churches are former Meeting House staff. The Meeting House will collect donations to support the Collective. This new entity presumably was able to get liability insurance.

of pastoral sexual abuse are women, and they are more likely to disclose abuse if they can disclose to a woman leader. They are more likely to get a fair hearing if women are on elder boards and investigative committees. In some parts of the Anabaptist church, we are loosening the theological hold of patriarchy, and this needs to continue to all Anabaptist churches.

The second factor that changes how victims are treated is the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements that have educated the general public about how leaders abuse their power, and the dynamics of sexual abuse. This has sparked a renewed desire for justice by those sexually abused by church leaders. When victims come forward, they can find people who will believe them because people know abuse when they see it.

The third factor is the internet. Today anyone with an internet connection can get information about pastoral sexual abuse. Victims can find on-line advocacy groups that are a huge source of empowerment. If a victim of pastoral sexual misconduct is treated unfairly, or shamed by the church, their story is likely to appear on the internet, for everyone in the congregation to read. It is no longer possible to so easily silence victims, or shield those who abuse from the consequences of their choices.

The fourth factor is the courts. In quite a few countries, victims can use the internet to easily connect to law firms who will help them sue the church for damages, at no financial cost to themselves. The church for centuries has done nothing to help victims of pastoral sexual abuse. It is the courts that have held the church accountable. Money talks, and after hundreds of millions of dollars in damages, churches have finally had to take notice of the harm done to pastoral sexual misconduct victims. Churches have had to declare bankruptcy and sell their assets to pay for damages.

The fifth factor is insurance companies. In countries where people can sue for damages, churches have to have insurance. Insurance companies want to mitigate risk--they have forced churches to get better safe place policies, and create procedures to hold leaders accountable for the power they wield. Insurance companies refuse to insure unsafe spaces.

It is a tragic commentary on the church that secular organizations have done more to protect the wounded than the church itself. This is a Good Samaritan story on the largest scale: the church walking by the wounded, and those outside the church doing God's work.

All five of these factors were in play in the case of The Meeting House, an Anabaptist church that had a very effective ministry doing good things for God. The victim abused by Bruxy Cavey eventually recognized that she was being abused. There was a female leader in her own church to whom she could disclose the abuse, who believed her. When the church tried to downplay the abuse by naming it as sexual harassment, the internet helped the victim to get support and tell her side of the story. The courts charged the ministers of the church with crimes, and the church was sued for damages. And finally, it was the insurance companies that assessed the unsafe practices of The Meeting House, which meant it had to close. Ironically, "a church for people not into church" became a "church closed by people not in the church."

The future is calling, and it is a future where we try not to abuse one another in church. Our mission to the world needs to be set on the solid foundation of theology and practice, with policies and procedures for dealing with abuse when it happens. We can encourage women leaders, and examine our theology for biases that hurt victims. With our world wide web of internet communication, ignoring the problem of sexual abuse in the church is not optional. The truth will out. Addressing abuse makes theological sense: how can we witness to the world about Jesus if we tolerate the abuse of people in our own beloved communities? Radical reform has happened all around us in society when it comes to abuse victims—will the church do its own work? If we fail to protect victims and hold those who abuse accountable, if we fail to keep our own house in order, God will use the courts and insurance companies to close us down.

I hope that my observations about the Canadian context will have resonances with other countries/continents represented here. I look forward to hearing your comments!