

Loving Our Vulnerable Neighbour: When Church Courts Fail and How We Can Do Better

Highlighting spiritual abuse by church officers against church members: a call to practice love and care without hostilities.

Written by Valerie Hobbs | Tuesday, February 14, 2017

Some have argued that stories like these have no place in the public eye. But we must hear them. We must resist the temptation to make these accounts more palatable. To stifle the stories of these women is to deny the reality that in all these and other similar cases, the church and its court system has failed to love our vulnerable neighbours. These women have been abandoned by leaders who in many cases are ignoring their cries for help and in other cases either don't understand their Books of Church Order or even deliberately use it to their own advantage.

A cornerstone of Presbyterianism is its Book of Church Order (or BCO, variously titled depending on the denomination). The Book's procedures and standards are designed to facilitate order, equity, and consistency in how the various denominations govern themselves, especially in handling questionable doctrine or sinful behaviour. As with any organization, without this important polity manual, powerful figures are more likely to dominate to the detriment of the (at least relatively) weak. Yet no human system is perfect, and every self-conscious Presbyterian would insist that no BCO should be in conflict with the church's core mission. If such a conflict is discovered, there is a process available for revision. [Peter Coertzen](#) explains the significance of a 'route of revision and appeal' for any set of procedures, noting that

the order which is created must be theologically accountable and as such must also be applied responsibly that is within the parameters found in the Scriptures.

The aim of this article is to examine the extent to which the Books of Church Order facilitate our obedience to the second of the two greatest commandments in Scripture: [Love your neighbour as yourself](#).

Love Your Neighbour as Yourself

In a 2012 edited collection entitled [What Does the Scripture Say?](#), Christopher Chandler investigates the exhortation to 'love your neighbour as yourself' from [Leviticus 19:18](#) and how it was applied by Jesus and His followers. Chandler writes:

That they [the Pharisees] 'acquitted the guilty and sentenced the just' and 'banded together against the life of the just' could readily be taken as references to their unjust practices in the courts. The latter phrase is a quote from Ps 94:21a. This psalm calls upon God to judge the injustice of those who 'slay the widow and the foreigner' and 'murder the orphan' (94:6) and who 'condemn the innocent to death' (94:21b).

Chandler's thesis is that, first, for those living in New Testament times, loving one's neighbour was understood as the doing of justice to one's neighbour in a court setting. And second, that this commandment emphasizes loving vulnerable neighbours in particular.

Chandler's analysis raises these questions: Who is our 21st century vulnerable neighbour? To what extent do our church court systems love him/her? How can we do better?

Who is a vulnerable neighbour?

In a way typical of many institutions, the [Church of England](#) defines a vulnerable adult

as a person who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, age or illness; and who is or may be unable to take care of him or herself, or unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation in any care setting. This includes individuals in receipt of social care services, those in receipt of other services such as health care, and those who may not be in receipt of services.

This definition encompasses a wide range of people, including those with mental illness, those with disability, those fleeing oppression, and victims of psychological or physical abuse. However, context is important. Certain individuals might be vulnerable in one context more so than another. Consider, for example, the vulnerability of a young woman walking by herself down a country lane to a local shop in the middle of the day. Compare this with the same young woman in a big city, walking home late at night, on her own, through areas where violent assault is frequent.

And vulnerability is ideological, as well as physical. Consider the risk of a new Christian practicing his religion openly in a culture hostile to Christianity, with no access to churches that preach the gospel. Then compare this with a new Christian doing the same but while surrounded by mature Christians and Christ-centred churches. In short, vulnerability is not static; it moves and shifts with context, though some will remain at-risk across a wider range of contexts.

The important question to ask ourselves is: Who is vulnerable where we are?

Are we loving our vulnerable neighbours?

Most of the vulnerable people who contact me are Christian women. Most of these women have suffered spousal abuse and have sought help from church leaders, only to be turned away or treated badly. By the time they contact me, they are often desperate, and some have even left the church.

Take, for example, a woman whom I will call Hannah. Hannah's session had fired her from her job as music leader at the church some years earlier. Their reason? She had refused to move back in with an abusive spouse. This had left Hannah with a mistrust of their ability to care for her. Hannah therefore contacted her presbytery's clerk to seek advice about another more recent and unrelated problem with her session.

Prior to this call, Hannah had sent a letter to the clerk, the same letter I read when Hannah first contacted me. This letter documented the church's response to her spousal abuse, her ensuing poverty, and her desire for the session to see her and to minister to her in this most

recent dispute. Having read this letter and during the approximately two-hour phone call, the clerk frequently interrupted Hannah and used harsh, cruel language, bordering on shouting. He referred to her as a violent oppressor, as a problem, and as an immature child, even as Hannah cried. He told her she was a 'pariah,' 'coercive,' 'violent,' 'frightening,' 'aggressive,' a 'tormentor', an 'abuser,' a 'threat to our church.' He said, 'I've read your letter. And I've listened to your conversation. And you're a problem.'*

Hannah is by no means unique. One woman reported that despite the proof she presented of her husband's repeated infidelity, her session declared her 'hormonal' and in need of medication to 'help me through my rough patch.' Another Christian woman reported that her session sent her letters threatening to strike her from the membership record for leaving her unfaithful and abusive husband. She had stopped attending church because many women in the church had sent her unkind letters, heaping burden upon burden, a problem the session refused to deal with.

And there is the case of another woman, who contacted me in late 2016. She sent me a letter from her session in which they required her to 'repent of withholding sexual intimacy' from her sex addict husband, who had raped her. The session was preparing to exercise church discipline against her, not him. Faced with such pressure, she withdrew her membership, losing her right of complaint.

In another case, a college student, victimized by stalking on a university campus, was invited to a Reformed church and quickly encouraged to enrol on multiple weekend-long Biblical Counselling courses. The one who issued the invitation, an on-staff church counsellor, spent long hours with her, putting deadlines on her to join the church, pressuring her to go on a six-month 'courtship track to marriage' and even to drop out of school and stop ballroom dancing, a hobby since childhood. All of this occurred explicitly against her Christian parents' counsel, within the space of a few months. With the help of two pastors in other churches, they were eventually able to persuade her to stay away from the counsellor and that particular church.

Another woman was placed under church discipline for failing to 'resume sexual submission and co-habitation' with a spouse who admitted to stalking, drugging, and sexually assaulting her for years. She eventually withdrew her membership. In her words,

I tried for many months to get the elders to follow the church order and release my membership to another [church session]. I followed the church order, and they totally ignored it; it was a situation of unwritten rules applying to me and the obvious and recorded rules of the denomination having NO bearing upon the elders themselves. Even when I articulated my last desperate request, that I resign my membership, they told me I had no authority to do such a thing.

Yet another Christian woman reported how she had shared a humiliating story with her pastor and his wife regarding her husband's abusive sexual behaviour. After this portion of the 'counselling' session, her pastor commanded his own wife to stand up so he could 'swat' her on her rear. Apparently, the pastor wanted to prove that the woman was overreacting, that 'for years, he had swatted his [own] wife on her rear, even among friends and in public.' What, then, was the big deal? This woman also left that church, losing her right of complaint.

The above cases are only a small sampling of what has happened recently in the PCA, the OPC, and the URCNA, what women have reported to me and what I have at times witnessed. In all cases, I have, where possible and appropriate, contacted church leaders with the information I have received to request a response, viewed documents, and/or contacted other witnesses for corroboration.

These stories were difficult for me to hear and are no doubt uncomfortable for you to read. Some have argued that stories like these have no place in the public eye. But we must hear them. We must resist the temptation to make these accounts more palatable. To stifle the stories of these women is to deny the reality that in all these and other similar cases, the church and its court system has failed to love our vulnerable neighbours. These women have been abandoned by leaders who in many cases are ignoring their cries for help and in other cases either don't understand their Books of Church Order or even deliberately use it to their own advantage. Often these are leaders who mean well and may even be trying to help but are misguided ideologically or practically. Often they appear to be men who ultimately can't see past themselves and their own interests. Right now, at this moment, Christians are struggling all over the United States, all over the world, under the weight of the injustice that they carry and re-carry, many of them with no human help.

Vulnerability and the Books of Church Order

I have searched for statistics regarding the frequency with which women, who are often vulnerable, file complaints in various Reformed Christian denominations. I suspect one would have to go to the historical records office of each denomination and comb through presbytery records and sessional minutes to arrive at such statistics. However, despite this shortfall, I am fairly certain, as are pastors I have consulted, that few women file complaints in the church courts without some advocacy.

One obvious reason for the paucity of complaints filed by such women is the imperviousness of the various BCOs and their procedures to laypeople, particularly vulnerable laypeople. Return with me to the case of Hannah, the woman verbally abused by her presbytery's clerk. This remarkable woman attended five presbytery meetings and filed and refiled two different complaints multiple times after they were rejected on various grounds over several years. In multiple instances, the leaders involved did not explain to her the reasons her complaints were ruled out of order. In fact, they made these clear only after I pressed them to do so. And even after Hannah made it over the first hurdle, filing one of her complaints successfully, she was passed from commission to commission as various members delayed and/or resigned, necessitating the appointment of new members, requiring that both they and Hannah start from scratch. In the end, her hard work was in vain as both her complaints were found out of order. Frustratingly, the judgment about the phone call with the clerk contained numerous factual errors which I sought to correct with no reply from the committee.

But there are other reasons why vulnerable Christians are unable or unwilling to file complaints. There is the issue of time constraints. For at-risk members of the church, their immediate priority is often the physical safety of themselves and their children. On most occasions, those experiencing trauma are unable to prioritize filing a complaint within the various limited time periods the BCOs stipulate. By the time many of the aforementioned women managed to get their bearings, the narrow window of complaint had closed.

Remember also that many women in need of help have already been wounded and bullied by their own sessions, some of whom treat delicate, personal matters with great disrespect and callousness. Women have reported suffering from panic attacks and multiple health concerns as a consequence of both the abuse and secondary abuse they have suffered. For some, contacting further church leaders constitutes a great risk, one they simply do not believe is worth taking, particularly without an advocate. Understandably, most withdraw their membership, losing their right of complaint. After a time of recovery, some women have reported contacting multiple church leaders in their presbytery, who turned them away.

The Sisyphean System: How can we do better?

Why do these stories continue to happen? Why do we assume the worst of people suffering? Why are we too often like Eli in I Samuel 1:10, a man who walked in faith yet reacted in sweeping and cruel judgement to the hurting woman who cried out to God? At the heart of all of these cases are ideological issues that need our collective attention and correction. God saw Hagar's abandonment by Abraham and Sarai in Genesis 16, and He sees all those with similar burdens. There are vulnerable people in every congregation whom it is a church leader's privilege and duty to serve. Leaders, learning how to love your at-risk neighbour involves educating yourself about trauma and its effects, about disability, about mental illness, about chronic illness, about dementia. It means abandoning such mindsets as that a victim of abuse can or should just "get over it." It means leaving behind the notion that those with no medical expertise should try on their own to repair a person's physical body or mental self. It requires a commitment of care to your brother or sister for life—and not just until they become too inconvenient, until you can no longer handle their hurt.

I hope to consider these ideological issues elsewhere. But the focus of this post is this: **Loving our vulnerable neighbour requires adapting our systems and our attitudes to meet their real needs.** More specifically, this post has sought to make explicit the compounding issue of the church court system, which often fails to protect those who are vulnerable, and which makes it harder for pastors to help those who need it most.

How can we improve the system? Consider the following possibilities, as a start:

1. Amendments to the Books of Church Order, appropriate to the needs of at-risk people. These might include:
 - a. changes to time restrictions

For example, the PCA BCO 43-2 gives a 60-day time frame in which a member in good standing can file a complaint. The EPC BCO 13.4 specifies the narrowest window of those I examined, that of 15 days. The OPC BCO IX.2 is the most generous I have seen, stipulating a 3-month window 'unless it is shown that it could not have been presented within that time.' This last clause is particularly encouraging to see, if it actually facilitates justice for vulnerable people, and, if so, could be a step in the right direction for other denominations.

- b. guaranteed access to a neutral adviser

The PCA BCO 43-5 states a complainant *may obtain* the assistance of a communing member of the PCA, but there is no guarantee of such assistance. OPC BCO IX contains no mention of assistance for a complainant, though a person *accused* is entitled to counsel from another OPC member in good standing (BCO IV.A.3). In most cases, it seems, a complainant is on his/her own unless she happens to know a sympathetic party in the denomination, which is not very likely when it comes to those at-risk.

c. a more accessible version of the BCO

The language of most BCOs I have encountered is exclusionary and automatically gives church leaders an advantage. By that, I mean the language is difficult to make sense of without regular use and guidance. Leaders in the church who are required to consult the BCO as part of their position are automatically in a position of privilege over those for whom the process of complaint may be their first encounter with the BCO.

2. The establishment of a past-case review, similar to that found [here](#). Vulnerable adults often leave the church before they can make a complaint, in order to protect themselves and their children. As a result, the church court is not notified of cases where discipline (or more) is needed. One possible solution might be to consider the following model:

In Southport, UK, at the United Reformed Church General Assembly in July, 2016, a group known as the Safeguarding Advisory Group (SAG) reported on the progress of a project, known as the Safeguarding Past Case Review. This project was [commissioned](#) by the Missions Council in November, 2015, to bring detailed proposals before the Council ‘on issues of abuse in the Church.’ Phase One involved reading 1,556 ministers’ files and classifying them according to level of concern and urgency of response and referring them if necessary. SAG [reported](#) on trends within the resulting 54 referred ministers’ files.

SAG also introduced Phase Two in March,

open for anyone who believes that they have been inappropriately dealt with by the Church to be listened to. From April to October 2016 this phase will encourage those who feel they have been carrying a burden to share that with specialist listening teams.

At URC General Assembly in July, 2016, SAG [reported](#) these findings and plan to the wider body along with their hope that Phase Two would commence that same month. Whether or not the Safeguarding Past Case Review will bring about positive change in this particular denomination remains to be seen. Regardless, this is a significant step forward and one other denominations should considering emulating, as a matter of urgency.

3. Appropriate training of church staff and congregants. Such training might include better equipping staff to use the BCO wisely, to minister to at-risk individuals, to identify those in need, to spot abusive behaviour, and to respond appropriately. Of even greater priority is firm grounding in the theology which lies at the heart of cases involving vulnerable people.

Jesus Christ as Covenant-established Legal Advocate

Those we perceive as difficult are the ones that God requires us to love the most. In loving our vulnerable neighbour, we must consider circumstances, backgrounds, frailties, and burdens, many of which we cannot even comprehend, most of which we cannot fix. Now is the time to obey our Saviour's command to pour out a love worthy of that by which we have been called. In the early church, certain groups were particularly vulnerable as they had no male legal advocate. But as [one pastor friend](#) put it, it is Christ who is the advocate of the neglected, the voiceless, and the vulnerable. Take care, church leaders, that you do not fail those for whom Christ advocates. Jesus Christ stands before them as witness (Eph. 1:3; 2:4-6; Col. 3:1-4).

Why do we love our vulnerable neighbour? In the end, we do so not because we wish to make ourselves more palatable to secular society. We do this not because it will satisfy a longing in us to serve and in so doing become better people. We love our neighbour because Christ commands it and because to do so is to acknowledge God's holiness and His saving work. 'And the King will [reply](#), "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine, you did for Me."'

**I am able to quote from this phone call because Hannah began recording approximately 45 minutes in. She had not intended to record the call until it became – to her surprise – a clear example of the verbal abuse her divorce attorney had advised her to record. In fact, the clerk's email to her before the call had been, in her words, 'pastorally and kind'.*