

## Beyond Symbolic Gestures: The PCA and Underprivileged Women

Collateral damage: Abused women whose churches fail to minister to and care for them.

*Written by Valerie Hobbs | Thursday, September 21, 2017*

*On the one hand, Jessica was encouraged. This was the first acknowledgement from a church court that her church leaders had wronged her. The RPR Committee had officially (for the second time in two years) cited her presbytery. Perhaps members of her church might begin to question the ways Jessica had been characterized and treated by her session and presbytery.*

The irony that frequently emerges in cases involving abuse in the church can sometimes reach the level of unbelievable. I started writing down instances of particularly striking irony sometime last year, when I realized a clear pattern was emerging. A recent example was this: A friend told me to talk to a leader in the PCA, explaining, 'You and he have the same goals!' During our conversation, this person who'd been described as someone who 'cares about women' referred to abused women whose churches fail them as 'collateral damage.' According to this man, he and other church leaders choose the 'long view.' In short, many leaders choose not to challenge their friends. Instead, they believe that these friendships, these relationships are the key for planting seeds of change. And what of the women who suffer along the way? Well, they say, what can we do except hope there isn't *too much* damage in the meantime.

More recently, though, I noted another ironic event during the 2017 Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) General Assembly, which I watched online. Perhaps you too watched some of debate on the Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Women Serving in the Ministry of the Church. At the end, as the chair voiced his relief and the organist joined in with a few notes of the *Hallelujah Chorus*, the ninth and final committee recommendation passed quickly.

Immediately after, commissioners began filing out en masse. Only a few minutes remained in this particular session, and it seems many of the commissioners were tired from the debate and not particularly interested in what was next.

One person in particular, however, remained in the room. Jessica Fore had waited patiently while the men around her debated and discussed women in ministry, few realizing that amongst them was a woman in ministry for whom this GA was especially significant.

But though she listened with interest, Jessica was not there for the debate. Rather, she was waiting to hear the outcome of her own particular case, brought before the GA by the Review of Presbytery Records Committee (RPR). Her presbytery's treatment of two complaints she filed had been flagged up in the minutes. A motion to require the presbytery to appear immediately before the Standing Judicial Commission (SJC) was narrowly defeated. Perhaps few committee members knew the details of her case. But the committee had voted almost unanimously to cite the presbytery (again) for not addressing 'the substance of the complaint

thereby denying a member the “watchful care, instruction and government of the church” to which the member is entitled.’

Jessica’s case is long and complex, going back at least five years. It involves a PCA church firing Jessica from her job as worship leader for refusing to move back in with her abusive husband. It involves a more recent dispute with members of the congregation which had resulted in the leaders of her small group allegedly removing her without due process. It involves a nearly two-hour phone call with the clerk of her presbytery, who called her story ‘crap’ and told her she was a ‘pariah,’ ‘coercive,’ ‘violent,’ ‘frightening,’ ‘aggressive,’ a ‘tormentor’, an ‘abuser,’ a ‘threat to our church.’ It involves numerous attempts by Jessica to file complaints related to these matters, only to be frustrated for years by delays and administrative red tape. It involves Jessica’s session eventually indicting her, though these charges were later dropped.

As the recent decision by the RPR Committee required approval by the GA, Jessica was hopeful that at last some details of her case might finally be heard and discussed before the entire Assembly. Perhaps things her own church leaders had done and said about her behind closed doors would be brought out into the light. Only minutes before, the GA had voted in favor of Recommendation 8, which stated:

*That sessions, presbyteries and the General Assembly consider how they can affirm and include underprivileged and underrepresented women in the PCA.*

But in the end, the decision about Jessica’s case was packaged in with nearly all RPR business and upheld by a single vote. The RPR committee report left commissioners and attendees none the wiser about Jessica’s case. The chair named a few presbyteries in his statement, those who had failed to submit minutes. But Jessica’s presbytery was not mentioned, perhaps for expediency’s sake.

On the one hand, Jessica was encouraged. This was the first acknowledgement from a church court that her church leaders had wronged her. The RPR Committee had officially (for the second time in two years) cited her presbytery. Perhaps members of her church might begin to question the ways Jessica had been characterized and treated by her session and presbytery.

On the other hand, public exposure of this case at GA would’ve been a step towards necessary public acknowledgement of cases of abuse. It would’ve signaled that such cases present a tangible opportunity to do the very thing laid out in Recommendation 8. Perhaps the RPR believed they were doing all they could do with the resources available to them. But the reality is that the RPR committee sent her case back to a court in which Jessica has no real advocate. Those who care about such things may see the vote on Jessica’s case at PCA GA as a kind of small victory. However, for me, the jury is still out on whether or not the leaders of the PCA will move beyond symbolic gestures.

*This is the first of three posts on Jessica’s case. These posts will not focus specifically on Jessica’s complaints. Again, they have been sent back to presbytery by GA, and hopefully the presbytery will hear them fully. Instead, the next posts will discuss two related trends that*

*have emerged in Jessica's case and which are part and parcel to many other abuse cases in the Christian church:*

- 1. The construction of the victim as deviant and*
- 2. The sacrifice of the victim for the sake of the status quo.*