

Serving the Status Quo

Ministering to the vulnerable in the church with care and love.

Written by Valerie Hobbs | Sunday, October 1, 2017

This is the final in a series of three posts (read the first [here](#) and the second [here](#)) about the ways in which one PCA church has responded to a case of abuse. In this post, I examine the ways in which Jessica's church leaders protected the status quo, at her expense.

After it became clear that the shepherding committee would not hear Jessica's complaint against the clerk, I suggested to Jessica that I send them an analysis of her conversation with the clerk. I hoped to impress on them the magnitude of his violation of her and the paltry nature of his response. I sent my letter and analysis in early January, 2016, after which the chair duly thanked me for my 'unbiased opinion of the event.' He then explained that presbytery would shortly hear Jessica's complaint and that 'At that point, there will be an in-depth investigation in all areas mentioned, I assume.'

The next day, the presbytery appointed a commission, made up of entirely new members, to examine Jessica's complaint against her session and act on behalf of the presbytery. There was no mention of Jessica's phone conversation with the clerk. To my knowledge, the chair of the shepherding committee kept my letter and analysis to himself. This same man, in Jessica's presence, seconded the motion to renew the clerk's term of office. When I questioned this action, he explained, 'we all wanted to move [things] along.'

For many others, too, it seems, expediency and maintaining the status quo outweigh the suffering of any one individual and the need to challenge those responsible for abuse. The previous post mentioned other ways in which this manifested itself in Jessica's case. Casting Jessica in the role of deviant oppressor, for example, certainly allows the status quo to go unchallenged. And this often has the effect of forcing the vulnerable person out of that community, leaving the problematic culture intact. Indeed, many have asked Jessica over the years, 'Why don't you just leave?' Certainly the session and the presbytery seemed to want her to leave. In one of their letters, the shepherding committee recommended that she do so. The clerk also, saying, 'Either let it go, or go yourself.' Many women in a similar position do end up leaving. And the very fact that Jessica stayed and protested only increased the anxiety of those around her, who seemed unable to cope with her difficulties and her difference. I too at times expressed doubt and concern at some of her actions, knowing how those around her would use her actions, as proof that she was not worth defending, as evidence that everything was wrong with her, and nothing was wrong with their response to abuse. (Many women have likewise reported the inequitable scale which requires women to be angelic in order for church leaders to take seriously an abuser's behavior. Rather than respond to trauma in reasonable ways – fear, mistrust, anger, bitterness – women are supposed to act as if the trauma has no effect on them.)

But expressions of status-quo preservation are also often rather subtler. After the presbytery denied both of Jessica's complaints in January, 2017, I spoke by phone with a member of her presbytery. I had been involved here and there in Jessica's case, where it seemed appropriate, and I wanted to hear this leader's thoughts on the outcome of her case. In our 1.5-hour conversation, the leader urged me to move my work into a more positive, hopeful direction.

Many in the church have offered similar advice to me. It tends to go like this:

The leaders in that church or presbytery are not ready for the kinds of changes that this case demands. However, we are hopeful that the seeds for change are being planted, behind the scenes, via quiet conversations. Leave this with us, let us continue to try to convict those around us in a more relational way. Your public-facing work might hinder the repentance process of leaders in the wrong, so instead focus your own work on providing general advice to people working with vulnerable Christians. Try to stay out of any one particular case. They aren't the right avenue for this. Speaking out rocks the boat too much.

Who benefits from this? Church leaders. Who suffers? People like Jessica. As I mentioned in the first post in this series, one church leader responded that Jessica and others like her are unavoidable 'collateral damage' in the slow process of critical reflection and repentance in church leadership. Indeed, many leaders have made it clear that they will not tolerate any action that challenges the relationships and the procedures they have forged.

Returning again to the first post, we may see the vote on Jessica's case at PCA GA as a kind of small victory. Her case has been sent back to her presbytery. However, the slow mechanisms of the court do not serve those who are hurting **right now, at the hands of the very courts they are told to seek help from**. Jessica was wounded by members of her church. The church made some attempt to mediate but also actively participated in substituting a person for a myth. They brought in a counselor she had never seen to comment on her supposed mental instability. They disregarded her meticulous records in their judgments, seemingly unconcerned with the truth. They sought to bind her conscience with unscriptural directives, bringing her under church discipline when she would not submit.

The clerk hurled insult after insult at her, acting wholly inappropriately and beneath his station as an officer of the church. And she had a recording! Would the presbytery, confronted by such a gross violation as this, finally demonstrate that she was worthy of their protection? Would they fulfill their duty of care towards her? No, they would not. What is the likelihood that they will do so now?

Since the first post in this series appeared, another PCA woman has contacted me to say she is about to leave the PCA because of how her church leadership has responded to her abusive marriage. And so women such as Jessica and others like her continue to climb, over and over, pushing the abuse they suffer up the PCA's mountain of men, who push them down again and again, heaping burden upon burden. Who will put an end to this?

Please understand. The people involved in these matters are not malicious, at least I assume not. Some of them seemed to have the best of intentions. At times, Jessica was encouraged and filled with hope at the kindness some showed her, including some church leaders. Certain individuals spoke to her with compassion and love. Some leaders even abstained from communion as a result of her case, demonstrating that they too were searching their hearts throughout these events.

However, although the affirmation of Recommendation 8 by the PCA is a positive step, at this moment it is only a theoretical step, demonstrating principally symbolic action. If we are to take seriously such actions by the PCA, we must see clear evidence that leaders are taking

concrete action to affirm and include the least privileged among us. Such actions require more than political maneuvering and at times might require that we make personal sacrifices, even lose friendships important to us. They require doing what is right, right now, with who is right in front of us.