

**Radical Embodiment: Creating Safe Churches**

By: Devin Hogg

Student ID: 21104563

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Instructor: Carol Penner

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## Introduction

Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century it has become clear that abuse in the church is both widespread and persistent. Much effort has been expended identifying causal factors. Far less attention has been devoted to practical ways in which churches and faith communities can prevent sexual abuse in the first place. In this paper, I will argue that churches and faith communities can only become safe spaces by becoming affirming and cultivating physical and sexual literacy.

## Background

To create churches and faith communities which are truly safe it is important to develop preventative measures that address the causes of abuse and violence. Kim and Shaw assert that violence is gender and power based.<sup>1</sup> Sexual violence includes a wide range of behaviours both physical and non-physical. Men are most often the perpetrators, and the victims most often know their perpetrator. Women with disabilities, gay, bisexual, and transgender men, Black, Indigenous, women of colour (both trans- and cisgender) are especially vulnerable.<sup>2</sup>

Churches of all denominations have enacted several measures to respond to and prevent abuse. Often this takes the form of “Safe Church” policies. The efficacy of such policies in preventing and responding to abuse is lacking. Dallam et al. conducted a policy analysis of written child sexual abuse prevention policies in all thirty-two Roman Archdioceses in 2020 that revealed inconsistent policies in general and low-compliance with evidence-based measures in particular.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Surviving God: A New Vision of God Through The Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors*. Broadleaf, 2024. Kindle ebook

<sup>2</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 27-28

<sup>3</sup> Stephane J. Dallam et al, “Analysis of the Written Policies of the 32 Archdioceses on the Prevention of Childhood Sexual Abuse, *Child Sexual Abuse* 30, no. 8 (November 2021): 891-910, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2021.1970678>

Challenging abuse on scriptural grounds is also a common response. While there is a need for engagement with scripture, Allison asserts that exchanging Bible verses is largely ineffective in achieving lasting change. She argues that the prevalence of abuse and the beliefs that support it, knowingly or unknowingly, is often more a matter of ideology than of hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup>

Since preventing abuse using scripture and policy has been ineffective, more radical strategies are needed. Johnson argues that social change at the micro-level of everyday interactions is of crucial import and often overlooked. They point out that everyday person-to-person interactions offer several advantages. These interactions are accessible to all change agents, contribute to systemic change from the “ground-up”, and center the lived experience of the body and the relationships between bodies.<sup>5</sup> I will explore further the ways in which churches becoming affirming, and cultivating sexual and physical literacy will affect change at this level.

### **Becoming Affirming: A Challenge to Purity Culture and Abuse**

Allison asserts that purity culture is intrinsically tied to abuse as it allows shame and ignorance to proliferate. This in turn means that people raised in purity culture lack the tools and knowledge to identify abuse and are less likely to report it when it is noticed and identified as such.<sup>6</sup> She argues that to dismantle purity culture and abuse, its crucial to affirm 2SLGBTQIA+ people and their relationships.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Emily Joy Allison, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How To Find Healing*, Broadleaf, 2021, Kindle ebook

<sup>5</sup> Rae Johnson, *Embodied Activism: Engaging the Body to Cultivate Liberation, Justice, and Authentic Connection: A Practical Guide for Transformative Social Change*, North Atlantic, 2023, Kindle ebook

<sup>6</sup> Allison, *#ChurchToo*, 37-73

<sup>7</sup> Allison, *#ChurchToo*, 108

Non-affirming theology is intrinsically dangerous as it denies healthy expression of sexuality and is tied to high rates of homelessness, depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicide attempts. It works in conjunction with purity culture tenets such as modesty rules, compulsory abstinence, ignorance of consent, and poor sex education to create an environment ripe for sexual abuse. Non-affirming theology can also discourage disclosure after abuse occurs due to the fears of being outed, forced to attend conversion therapy or blamed for the abuse. In light of this, any theology which teaches heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation acceptable to God and that people of all other orientations must either change their sexuality or remain celibate should also be recognized as sexual violence.<sup>8</sup>

Conversely, the practice of affirming 2SLGBTQIA+ people and their relationships is equally potent. Research has demonstrated that the presence of even one affirming, supportive adult lowers the risks of harm and mental health immensely. To save lives and increase quality of lives, churches and faith communities becoming 2SLGBTQIA+ affirming is essential.<sup>9</sup>

### **Practicing Public, Intentional and Explicit Affirmation**

To cultivate churches and faith communities which are publicly, intentionally, and explicitly affirming of 2SLGBTQIA+ people and their relationships churches should begin by paying attention to language and cultivating language which challenges heteronormative assumptions. Many of the resources that churches have provided for partner abuse have reflected heteronormative assumptions. Using the term “intimate partner violence” in place of “domestic violence” is one way to challenge heteronormativity.<sup>10</sup> In Canada, Affirm United which works in partnership with the United Church of Canada but is an independent, volunteer-led movement

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<sup>8</sup> Allison, *#ChurchToo*, 114-119

<sup>9</sup> Allison, *#ChurchToo*, 118

<sup>10</sup> Cathy Melesky Dante et al, “Power Literacy in Abuse Prevention Education: Lessons from the Field in the Catholic Safeguarding Response,” *Moral Theology* 13, no. 1 (2024): 130-155. DOI: 0.55476/001c.92065

has publicly available resources for all churches and faith communities to explore how to become affirming.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Importance of Sexual Literacy in Churches and Faith Communities**

Churches as a whole, even self-identified progressive ones, rarely have open dialogue in their communities about sex, gender, and sexuality.<sup>12</sup> This contributes to a lack of sexual literacy which leaves them collectively vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Certain ideas about sex and gender are linked to theology and can perpetuate the dangerous acceptance of sexual violence myths.<sup>13</sup> Purity culture, for example, is built on a series of false theological, emotional, spiritual and physical claims that have the result of denying bodily autonomy. It insists that consent is always a “no” when single and always a “yes” when married. This leaves adherents vulnerable to abuse and toxic relationship dynamics.<sup>14</sup> This is especially troublesome given that at the ages of eighteen-twenty, around eighty percent of people are having sex, including evangelical Christians who are abstinence-only educated and purity pledged. The result of the purity culture teachings in which adherents are raised is that they are having sex while lacking education on crucial subjects such as consent and safe sex.<sup>15</sup>

Since sexual violence is gender and power-based, abusers often target people based on gender hierarchies that are defined and maintained by patriarchal structures and binaries. This leads to any person seen as feminine or feminized in some way, including people who are poor, weak, or queer, being perceived as a legitimate target for violence.<sup>16</sup> Gender

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<sup>11</sup>The United Church of Canada, “Affirm United – Frequently Asked Questions”, Retrieved: December 10, 2024, URL: <https://affirmunited.ausc.ca/frequently-asked-questions-about-affirm-united-saffirmer-ensemble/>

<sup>12</sup> Allison, #ChurchToo, 36

<sup>13</sup> Allison, #ChurchToo, 134

<sup>14</sup> Allison, #ChurchToo, 91-143

<sup>15</sup> Allison, #ChurchToo, 88-89

<sup>16</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 26

complementarianism, the theology that men and women were created to fulfill specific roles, has very real effects.<sup>17</sup> It has been linked to greater belief in intimate partner violence myths.<sup>18</sup> Believing that women are inherently supposed to submit to male authority also has the effect of giving abusers, who are mostly men, more credibility than their accusers who are mostly women or other genders.<sup>19</sup> Gendered divisions of reason and emotion that contribute to the socialization of men and boys being unable to express their emotions in healthy ways may also lead to violence as an unhealthy expression of emotion. Gender scripts have the potential to promote relationships that view unjust suffering and submission as virtuous for Christians, accept power and control as natural byproduct of male authority in the family, and justify patriarchal structures that abuse power in the name of the church.<sup>20</sup> Increasing sexual literacy, the understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality, is crucial to both prevent abuse from happening and to identify it and respond appropriately when abuse occurs.

### **Practicing Sexual Literacy**

To cultivate sexual literacy in churches and faith communities, it is advisable to start with a primary pillar of ethical non-monogamy: no relationship is more important than the health and well-being of the people in it.<sup>21</sup> I will focus on strategies for two groups: people under the age of 18 and church leaders. Together, these two groups have a strong chance for effecting significant change in the overall sexual literacy of their churches and faith communities.

Young people should be educated on their anatomy and safe sex practices in order to enable them to maintain boundaries and report accurately when boundaries are violated.<sup>22</sup> Youth

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<sup>17</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 60-61

<sup>18</sup> Allison, *#ChurchToo*, 135-137

<sup>19</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 60

<sup>20</sup> Dante et al, "Power Literacy," 135

<sup>21</sup> Allison, *#ChurchToo*, 129

<sup>22</sup> Allison, *#ChurchToo*, 101-102

and community members should be educated on the signs of grooming and abuse to increase the likelihood of reporting. Young people should also be educated on the power dynamics in relationships to prevent abuse from occurring.<sup>23</sup> Children should be taught that they have a right to control who touches their bodies and they should be believed if they complain about an adult.<sup>24</sup>

Since children who grow up in a culture of supportive adults where moral discernment and agency are encouraged and where their ideas, feelings, and intuitions matter are less likely to be targeted for abuse and more likely to disclose, churches and faith communities should affirm children's and youth's moral and religious agency. Children and youth should be allowed to have a say in their faith formation and should be invited to exercise their rights and responsibilities as members of the congregation.<sup>25</sup> Churches and faith communities should also recognize and act on the need to collaborate with social service providers given children's involvement in multiple communities and the church's remaining role as an affordable and accessible source of programming for children and youth in many communities.<sup>26</sup>

Church leadership should be mindful of the language they use and how it will be received by survivors. They should refrain from congratulating survivors who decide to stay in church lest they unintentionally pressure people into remaining and being re-traumatized. They should affirm that all things are indeed possible with God, including salvation outside of the church.<sup>27</sup> Characterizations of church leaders as divinely ordained men and the laity as docile receivers

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<sup>23</sup> Dante et al., "Power Literacy," 131-134

<sup>24</sup> Erin Kidd, "The Violation of God in the Body of the World: A Rahnerian Response to Trauma," *Modern Theology* 35, no. 4 (October 2019): 663-682. DOI:10.1111/moth.12484

<sup>25</sup> Dante et al., "Power Literacy," 145

<sup>26</sup> Erin Olson O'Neill et al., "Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse Through Church and Social Service Collaboration," *Social Work and Christianity* 37, no. 4 (December 2010): 381-406

<sup>27</sup> David Farina Turnbloom et al., "Liturgy in the Shadow of Trauma," *Religions* 13, no. 583, (June 2022), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070583>

should be resisted. The laity should be empowered and the role of one's conscience emphasized.<sup>28</sup> Injunctions to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16) may be appropriate here.

To ensure that people are empowered to report abuse as adults, leaders should recognize the history of church silence and complicity in intimate partner violence. They should educate other community members that while perpetrators are usually male, and victims are usually female, there can be any combination of genders involved. Ways in which gendered assumptions of masculinity can lead to unhealthy relationships with one's emotions should be named and challenged.<sup>29</sup>

Church leaders also need to be familiar with mandatory reporting requirements and to be comfortable exercising them since fear and ignorance from church leaders has led to delays in reporting which can endanger lives.<sup>30</sup> Leaders in churches at both congregational and denominational levels should make sure that structures of accountability are separated from those who have incentive to deflect or cover up abuse.<sup>31</sup>

Those who speak from the pulpit should center scripture passages that promote gender equality from both testaments<sup>32</sup>. Survivors and victims of abuse from the Hebrew scriptures such as Eve, Lot's daughters, Dinah, Hagar, Bathsheba, Tamar, Vashti and Esther have been used with success in several faith communities<sup>33</sup>. New Testament survivors and victims such as Mary, the mother of Jesus, the woman who was almost stoned (John 8:2-11), the enslaved boys (1

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<sup>28</sup> Dante et al, "Power Literacy," 142

<sup>29</sup> Dante et al, "Power Literacy," 135

<sup>30</sup> O'Neill, "Prevention," 394

<sup>31</sup> Kidd, "The Violation," 678

<sup>32</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 67

<sup>33</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 132-153



Corinthians 6:9-10) and Jesus himself have met with similar success.<sup>34 35</sup> Likewise it should be acknowledge that images of God matter and that images images of God as masculine, omnipotent, white, king and emperor can unintentionally sanction racial hierarchy, patriarchy and the physical, verbal and sexual abuse of the vulnerable and marginalized in society.<sup>36</sup> Kaleidoscopic and intersectional imagery of God that holds multiple, shifting images of the Divine in tension and cultivates “both/and” thinking should be encouraged. Emphasizing God as vulnerable, capable of feeling pain, suffering, joy, and contentment allows the Divine to be in solidarity with survivors.<sup>37</sup> Highlighting imagery of God to as the Spirit who gives breath, air and life may be helpful in this endeavour. Emphasizing characteristics of God as suffering, relational, accompanying, overcoming, child, mother, and queer also hold liberatory potential.<sup>38</sup>

### **Physical Literacy: Breaking The Cycle Of Violence**

Bodies are the primary sites for reproducing unjust social systems and bear the brunt of discrimination and prejudice.<sup>39</sup> Non-verbal communication is used to transmit social power dynamics.<sup>40</sup> Non-verbal communication is also a key medium through which micro-aggressions can occur. Anywhere between sixty-five and ninety percent of a message’s meaning is communicated non-verbally. When verbal and non-verbal cues are used concurrently, non-verbal cues have four times the impact. When verbal and non-verbal cues contradict each other, the non-verbal cues are more likely to be believed.<sup>41</sup> To create churches and faith communities that

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<sup>34</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 159-167

<sup>35</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 177-195

<sup>36</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 38-46

<sup>37</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 48-51

<sup>38</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 102-125

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, *Embodied Activism*, 10

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *Embodied Activism*, 73

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, *Embodied Activism*, 66

are truly safe spaces, embodied practices of oppression must be mitigated and that requires cultivating physical literacy.<sup>42</sup>

### **Cultivating and Practicing Physical Literacy**

Western churches have proliferated Neo-Platonic, Gnostic, and dualistic teachings that separate the mind and body. Practicing trauma-informed embodiment is crucial to countering these influences and restoring the mind-body relationship.<sup>43</sup> Church leaders should be aware that trauma is heavily dependent on perception and thus can be experienced and held in many different ways. They should also recognize that trauma can influence the effects of liturgy because it involves embodied rituals.<sup>44</sup> Those who speak to the congregation from the pulpit should encourage an understanding of the Incarnation as human embodiment being God's language of self-revelation.<sup>45</sup>

Churches and faith communities need to recognize and accept that a wide range of coping mechanisms and not retraumatize someone by labelling a coping mechanism a sin.<sup>46</sup> They should accept that mindfulness, movement, therapy, and medication all play a role in healing from trauma and abuse.<sup>47</sup> They should cultivate joy and pleasure to heal shame, counter patriarchy, dissociation, and other forms of suffering.<sup>48</sup> <sup>49</sup> Churches should also challenge body norms to avoid replicating patterns of oppression and violence. They should encourage freedom of expression in dress and not insisting on traditional gender markers.<sup>50</sup> This will also serve to defang modesty teachings which contribute to the blaming of victims and struggles with self-

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<sup>42</sup> Johnson, *Embodied Activism*, 74

<sup>43</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 198-199

<sup>44</sup> Turnbloom, "Liturgy," 4-5

<sup>45</sup> Kidd, "The Violation," 680

<sup>46</sup> Kidd, "The Violation," 676

<sup>47</sup> Allison, *#ChurchToo*, 185-193

<sup>48</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Surviving God*, 196-198

<sup>49</sup> Allison, *#ChurchToo*, 145

<sup>50</sup> Johnson, *Embodied Activism*, 89-92

hatred and low self-esteem of men who are portrayed as sex crazed.<sup>51</sup> To ensure microaggressions are not perpetuated in everyday embodied interactions, it is necessary to increase somatic bandwidth and awareness of body language. It is also crucial to adopt an intercorporeal ethos.

Individuals can increase their somatic bandwidth, the range of capacity for bodily feelings and sensations, by cultivating the body's various sensory systems: interoception, proprioception, and exteroception. Interoception is sensory information arising from within the body such as pain, pressure, temperature, sexual arousal, fatigue, hunger, and thirst. It is also connected to emotional life and is foundational to sense of self as feeling entity. Interoception can be increased via mindfulness practices and vagus nerve stimulation. Proprioception is the perception of the relative position of neighbouring parts of the body and of the strength of effort being employed in movement. It works in conjunction with the vestibular system which provides sense of balance and spatial orientation to inform overall sense of body position, movement effort, and speed. Proprioception can be increased via movement practices like yoga, dance, sports, and martial arts. Exteroception is the perception of stimuli arising from outside the body including sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. Exteroception can also be increased via mindfulness practices.<sup>52</sup>

Individuals can increase their awareness of body language by being mindful and curious in their uses of gesture, posture, eye contact, facial expressions, and touch. They should be similarly mindful of their use of personal space, practice mutual navigation and negotiation of distance, and their movement relative to other aspects of physical territory such as entryways,

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<sup>51</sup> Allison, *#ChurchToo*, 42-45.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, *Embodied Activism*, 57-62

exits, and walls. It is important to note that nearly every aspect of body language has cultural, age, and gender dynamics that will influence how body language is expressed and perceived.<sup>53</sup>

An inter-corporeal ethos should be adopted collectively to guild bodily interactions. Johnson offers their VOICES model which maintains that bodily interactions should be voluntary, and embodied experiences should be owned to keep interactions between bodies real and personal. Boldly interactions should also be approached with curiosity and in a way congruent with one's values. They should be equitable and symphonic which entails sensitivity to which bodies take up space and express opinions, when they do so, and how they do so.<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

I suggest two main areas for further research. First, the resources within the Christian tradition for increasing physical and sexual literacy. Author Tina Schermer Sellers has made a solid start on this from a sex therapy perspective but further research from a theological perspective is indicated.<sup>55</sup> Second, a deeper look from an intersectional lens on how to incorporate embodied practices from other sources, both secular and religious, into Christian churches and faith communities.

Churches and faith communities which affirm 2SLGBTIA+ people and their relationships save lives, improve quality of lives, and prevent abuse. By cultivating sexual literacy, they are aware of issues relating to sex, gender, and sexuality. This equips them to prevent abuse from happening, identify it when it does happen, and respond appropriately. By cultivating physical literacy, they can become truly safe spaces which are mindful of the embodied ways in which unjust social dynamics are reproduced and take care to avoid doing so. By becoming affirming

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<sup>53</sup> Johnson, *Embodied Activism*, 65-73.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *Embodied Activism*, 118-121.

<sup>55</sup> Tina Schermer Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame From Sexual Intimacy*. Routledge, 2017. Kindle ebook.

and cultivating sexual and physical literacy, churches and faith communities be in alignment with their worship of a God of the living who requires them to love their neighbours. They can be communities which answer God's call to welcome stand in solidarity with the vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed.

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