

# **#MennonitesToo: Sexual Violence and Mennonite Peace Theology**

*Carol Penner*

## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the trajectory of the discussion of sexual violence in the Mennonite church and its relationship to Mennonite peace theology. Illustrating research findings with graphs, the author surveys four North American Mennonite periodicals from the past fifty years that provide a rich substrate of lived theology, points out how the discussion of sexual violence has waxed and waned, identifies recurring themes and noticeable gaps, and suggests directions for the future. While hopeful, the author contends that Mennonites have much work to do in forging a peace theology inclusive of all types of violence and all people.

## **Introduction**

As the #MeToo movement turns a spotlight on sexual violence, many people are asking: How do we address this reality in our communities? What can we do to stop the violence?<sup>1</sup> In this article I focus on these questions in the context of the Mennonite community in Canada and the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Mennonites have historically been a peace church, with early Anabaptists rejecting participation in military conflict. Over the last five hundred years Mennonites have developed, and in some cases rejected, theologies about military violence, working out what it means to be the “quiet in the land” as pacifists, conscientious objectors, and nonviolent resisters. While these different descriptors provide snapshots of the long-

---

<sup>1</sup> The phrase “Me Too” was first used on social media in 2006 by Black American activist Tarana Burke to encourage empathy for survivors of sexual abuse and harassment. In 2017 it was picked up as a hashtag (#MeToo) after allegations surfaced against Hollywood director Harvey Weinstein. It became a rallying cry for victims of sexual assault and abuse, and sparked a worldwide movement to address such violence.

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on the 2020 C. Henry Smith / 2020 Eby Lecture presented online by the author at Conrad Grebel University College on November 12, 2020.

term development of Mennonite peace theology concerning militarism, discussions around sexual violence have occurred over a much shorter timeframe, despite its having always existed. I seek to address that anomaly by focusing on the trajectory the discussion about sexual violence has taken in the church and the recurring themes apparent in this theology. I survey Mennonite periodicals from the past fifty years to understand lived theology on the ground. Recent academic writing explores both the history of sexual violence in the Mennonite church and ethical considerations going forward,<sup>3</sup> but in this article I am exploring how sexual violence was discussed in church magazines that the average person was reading in the Mennonite community. I will describe the way this topic was addressed and how the discussion waxed and waned over time. I will identify recurring themes and then point to noticeable gaps in the discussions, and end by suggesting directions for the future. My aim is to bring attention to, and generate discussion of, this significant but too often underexamined issue.

### **Periodicals as a Window on Attitudes about Sexual Violence**

What is “sexual violence”? For some people, the phrase may conjure up the image of sexual assault with a weapon or physical force. However, today it has a broader meaning connected to the idea of consent: sexual violence occurs when sexual acts, advances, or comments happen without a person’s consent.<sup>4</sup> I am old enough to remember when sexual violence was never spoken about in church. But in the late 1970s discussions of this issue started to take place, so there have now been around fifty years of public discourse on it.

---

<sup>3</sup> Some recent examples include, Rachel Waltner Goossen, “‘Defanging the Beast’: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 7-80; Kimberly Penner, “Mennonite Peace Theology and Violence against Women,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 280-90; and *Liberating the Politics of Jesus: Renewing Peace Theology through the Wisdom of Women*, edited by Elizabeth Soto Albrecht and Darryl W. Stephens (New York & London: T & T Clark, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> “Sexual violence is defined as: any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.”—World Health Organization, *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention*, (2014), 149, [https://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/global\\_campaign/en/chap6.pdf](https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap6.pdf), accessed January 13, 2021.

While I could have conducted a fifty-year study of Mennonite academic writing about sexual violence—and I hope to do that eventually—I find the popular press more revealing. Periodicals are helpful barometers to measure grassroots theological opinions. They show not only the emergence of new ideas but also the pushback to those ideas, with letters to periodical editors arguing against or affirming what is printed. Periodicals probably shape the church more than academic writing since they are more widely read, given their presence in people's homes.

In addition to these reasons to conduct research on periodicals, thanks to the wizardry of modern technology almost all these publications are digitized, and so word searches make studies like this more feasible and accurate than previously possible. For this study I tracked the use of the terms “rape” and “abuse”<sup>5</sup> in every article published over the last fifty years in a range of North American Mennonite church magazines and newspapers published weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly: *The Mennonite* and *The Gospel Herald*, and *The Mennonite Reporter* and its successor *The Canadian Mennonite*.<sup>6</sup> I looked at every article where those words were used in the past fifty years. The quantitative results of this investigation are shown in the graphs below.

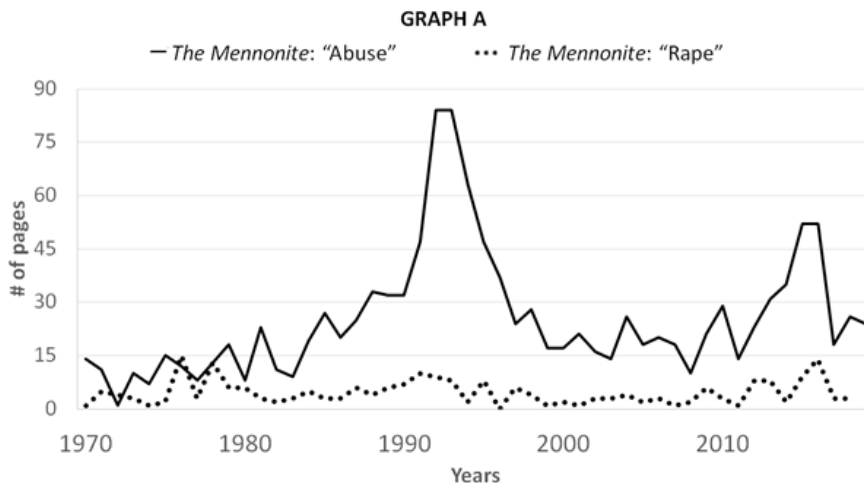
Graph A shows the prevalence of the terms “rape” and “abuse” in the biweekly publication *The Mennonite*. Since the search function of the database only shows that the term appeared on a page of this periodical, the data reflect the number of pages in question and not the number of the occurrences of the terms; an article may have used the word 20 times but that does not show up in these statistics. Thus, in the year 1970, *The Mennonite* published 854 pages of content, but only 15 pages contained the specific word “abuse.”<sup>7</sup> We can see that interest in the issue of abuse has fluctuated

---

<sup>5</sup> I debated using the term “sexual assault” for my search, but “rape” was more commonly used in the early decades of the discussion. Since it was a great deal of work using even two terms, I was reluctant to add more, though that would have been fruitful.

<sup>6</sup> *The Mennonite* and the *Gospel Herald* were the magazines of two major Mennonite denominational bodies, respectively the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church. When these denominations merged, the two publications merged under the title *The Mennonite*, while the *Gospel Herald* was discontinued. *The Mennonite Reporter* and its successor *Canadian Mennonite* were Canadian publications.

<sup>7</sup> Every year there were a few instances of these words used outside the context of sexual



over time, with a peak in the early 1990s. Interest then declined very rapidly, followed by a gradual upswing in the last few years. Even so, engagement has never returned to the level seen in the '90s. As the graph demonstrates, there was much less discussion about "rape" in *The Mennonite*.

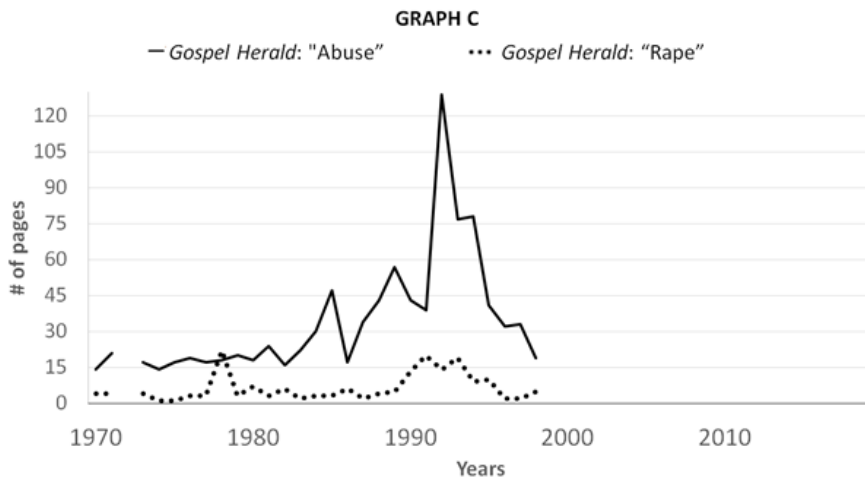
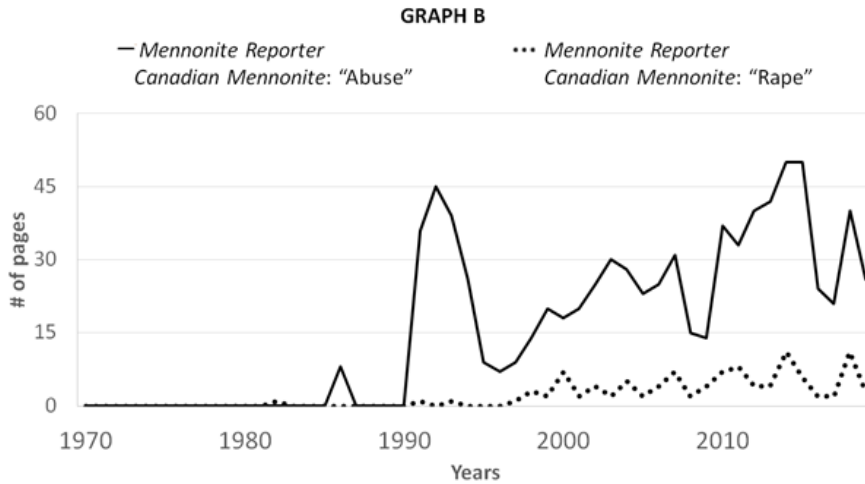
The bi-weekly Canadian publications, the *Mennonite Reporter* and the subsequent *Canadian Mennonite*, reveal similar results (Graph B).<sup>8</sup> Again there is a peak of interest in the early 1990s, though not as high as in the American publications. Coverage in the past decade slightly exceeds that found in the 1990s, while again rape is rarely discussed. Although the *Gospel Herald* shows even more of an interest in abuse in the early '90s, this periodical was published weekly, which may account for the larger number here (Graph C).<sup>9</sup> It was also willing to discuss the subject of rape more than any of the other publications, although such discussion was not very frequent.

---

assault; for example, "the abuse of scripture" or "rape of the environment." These uses were not excluded from the count since they occurred only occasionally.

<sup>8</sup> The *Mennonite Reporter* ceased publication in September 1997, replaced by the *Canadian Mennonite*.

<sup>9</sup> The *Gospel Herald* ceased publication in 1998, which is why the lines on this graph end there. There is also a gap in the statistics because some issues of the digitized material were not functional.



Having sketched out the appearance of the terms “abuse” and “rape,” I find the trajectory of the discussion about sexual violence fascinating. Some readers may think that the church does not talk about sexual violence enough and that the #MeToo movement is finally jumpstarting the church to think about it: these statistics illustrate that Mennonites have been talking about sexual violence for almost fifty years. While public discourse on it peaked in

the 1990s, it has never reached a similar level since then, except in Canada.

Why did Mennonites start talking about sexual violence in the 1970s? There could be many reasons but a primary one is that the second wave of feminism was sweeping through Canada and the US. The first wave (from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s) focused on gaining basic legal rights for women, including the right to be persons before the law, to own property, and to vote. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing until the 1990s, the second wave took the struggle for equality further, resulting in legislative changes regarding reproductive rights, employment equity, and sexual assault.<sup>10</sup> Women were demanding equality in North American society, and their voices were also more frequently represented in these Mennonite periodicals where they chose to write about sexual violence because it deeply affected them.

Why did interest in this issue peak in the 1990s? There were numerous high profile public scandals about pastoral sexual misconduct that galvanized secular media attention, such as the abuse by the Christian Brothers of Ireland at the Mount Cashel orphanage in Newfoundland, and television evangelist Jim Bakker's abuse of Jessica Hahn.<sup>11</sup> In the Mennonite press there were numerous articles about abuse by theologian John Howard Yoder and other prominent church leaders. In the 1990s Mennonite women in parachurch organizations such as the Mennonite Central Committee were at the forefront of advocacy, publishing resources and sponsoring dozens of events all over Canada and the US where people could get together to talk about sexual violence.<sup>12</sup> This activism kept the issue in the public eye and in the pages of the periodicals.

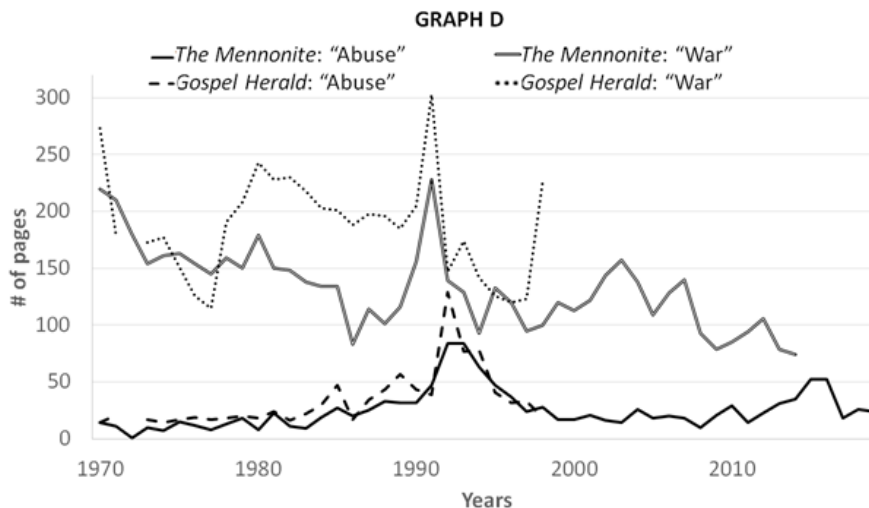
Why did this interest drop off after the '90s? The problem was not fixed; sexual violence was not eradicated. Perhaps people got tired of hearing about it, or it was edged out of public discourse because the changes it called

---

<sup>10</sup> Violet K. Dixon, "Western Feminism in a Global Perspective," *Inquiries* 3, No. 2 (2011): 1. <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/395/western-feminism-in-a-global-perspective>.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Harris, *Unholy Orders: Tragedy at Mt. Cashel* (Markham, ON: Viking, 1990); John H. Wigger, "Jessica Hahn and Pentecostal Silence on Sexual Abuse" *Pneuma* 41, no. 1 (2019): 26-30.

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent summary of these resources and conferences, see Linda Gehman Peachey, "Naming the Pain, Seeking the Light: The Mennonite Church's Response to Sexual Abuse," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 111-28.



for were too sweeping. In any case, the #MeToo movement has brought the issue back into the public eye and onto the pages of Mennonite periodicals.

Given the long-standing interest in discussions of war in Mennonite peace theology, I also compared how often the words “war” and “abuse” appeared in the pages of *The Mennonite* and *Gospel Herald* (Graph D).<sup>13</sup> In the 1970s—the Vietnam War era—war was talked about ten times more often than abuse or rape. Even in the ’90s, when Mennonites were discussing abuse the most, war appears twice as often (the Gulf War of 1990-1991 resulted in few North American casualties compared to the Vietnam War). In the last decade, there was less discussion about war, so the disparity is not as great. Sexual violence continued unabated throughout all these decades.

These findings provide much food for thought. While World Health Organization statistics say that one in three women experiences sexual violence in their lifetime,<sup>14</sup> some groups experience even higher rates (for

<sup>13</sup> I did not compile statistics about war for the Canadian publications because the *Mennonite Reporter* is not digitized and the work required to do a page count was too labor-intensive.

<sup>14</sup> World Health Organization, “Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-partner Sexual Violence” (2013), 16-20, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241564625>, accessed January 13, 2021.

example, disabled people and indigenous persons). This suggests that readers of Mennonite periodicals were directly experiencing sexual violence, yet this reality is not reflected in how often it was discussed. Sometimes it is easier to talk about war in other countries and harder to talk about the violence in our own homes. Readers may want to reflect on their own experience. For instance, if you attend a Mennonite church, school, or college, does this discussion correspond to your experience in these institutions? Is sexual violence talked about in these settings? In churches, is it spoken of in sermons, prayers, or educational material? In educational institutions, is it addressed by the administration or through course material? How does the prominence of this issue compare to discussions of war, pacificism, or other aspects of peace theology?

The quantitative research outlined above reveals the trajectory of the discussion of sexual violence in the church press, with its peak in the 1990s. I turn now to the content: What was the press actually saying about sexual violence over this fifty-year period?

### **Three Recurring Themes**

During the course of researching these articles about sexual violence I repeatedly encountered three themes: the importance of storytelling, a feminist analysis of power where patriarchy is named, and a wide array of theological reflection.

#### *Importance of storytelling*

A problem cannot be addressed if no one will speak about it. Sexual violence first appeared in articles written by social workers, group home workers, and psychologists. They wrote of situations their clients were facing, usually in brief and vague ways. Perhaps church periodicals were initially reluctant to have people speak frankly about sexual violence. When it was discussed, it tended to be about situations outside Mennonite churches.

At a certain point that changed when, in the late 1980s, first-person stories of abuse started to appear. For example, one woman described the effect of growing up as a victim of sexual abuse: "It is much like being run over by a huge truck and having to spend the rest of one's life learning to walk again. Only this truck was driven by my father. . . . But no one, absolutely no



one, was willing to walk with me.”<sup>15</sup> First-person stories of sexual assault and abuse were mostly written by women but a few were written by men.<sup>16</sup> Authors talked about who hurt them and what effects they suffered. Survivors often experienced self-blame and shame, and had difficulty loving themselves, other people, and God.<sup>17</sup> When they disclosed the abuse, the church usually responded by denying or minimizing the hurt. Survivors recounted how the church, a place that should be a refuge and place of healing, often re-victimized them and added to their trauma.<sup>18</sup> In a *Gospel Herald* cover story in 1991, Cathleen Hockman reported that sexual violence was happening in Mennonite schools and colleges.<sup>19</sup> There were also articles about supports for people who had sexually offended and programs working to help prevent them from reoffending.<sup>20</sup>

The most controversial reporting was in the form of stories about the sexual misconduct of church leaders. There was a flurry of such stories in the 1990s and numerous letters to the editor whenever they appeared, some suggesting that it was terrible to make this matter public because it should be dealt with privately.<sup>21</sup> Some letters claimed that it was slanderous to report about someone having their credentials revoked, even going so far as to claim that the accusations were likely exaggerated or the investigation was unfair.<sup>22</sup> However, just as many letters praised editors for running the stories, saying that the truth must come out and victims have a right to share the harm done to them by a church leader.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous, “The Tree,” *Gospel Herald*, September 27, 1988, 658-59.

<sup>16</sup> Another example of a first-person survivor story written by a woman: Name withheld, “Readers Say,” *Gospel Herald*, August 4, 1992, 4. An example of a male survivor story: Anonymous, “Dealing with Abuse: To Break the Silence is to Begin to Heal,” *Gospel Herald*, November 12, 1991, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Joanne Lehman, “Survivors Tell Stories of Abuse,” *The Mennonite*, April 28, 1992, 183.

<sup>18</sup> Wilma Derksen, “Break the Circle of Violence,” *ibid.*, February 28, 1989, 79.

<sup>19</sup> Cathleen Hockman, “Rape Also Happens on the Church College Campus,” *Gospel Herald*, September 10, 1991, 1-3.

<sup>20</sup> No author, “The Church Can Be a Place of Healing,” *ibid.*, August 24, 1993, 1-4; Anna Groff, “Mennonite Churches Discern If and How to Minister to Convicted Sex Offenders,” *The Mennonite*, April 21, 2009, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Ann Bender, “Readers Say,” *Gospel Herald*, April 7, 1992, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Mable Yoder, “Readers Say,” *ibid.*, May 5, 1992, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Melissa Miller, “Readers Say,” *ibid.*

Editors of Mennonite periodicals joined together to write guidelines for reporting on pastoral sexual misconduct. They explained that this type of misconduct is not just a story between two people but a violation of public trust in the church, and that silence only leads to more victims.<sup>24</sup> *Gospel Herald* editor J. Lorne Peachey wrote that in his decades of working in the church press, no other issue had generated more letters to the editor than professional sexual misconduct.<sup>25</sup>

Storytelling about the reality of sexual violence in society and in the lives of church members was an important function of the periodicals and set the stage for the next theme I found.

### *Social analysis of power and patriarchy*

In a 1990 article Ruth Krall, then director of Peace Studies at Goshen College, called for the church to stop covering up sexual violence. “A peace of silence is an unjust peace,” she stated,<sup>26</sup> asking “What in our community of faith has allowed [sexual violence] to go unchallenged?”<sup>27</sup> Krall and many other writers of that decade talked about patriarchy. Numerous articles pointed out that the vast majority of sexual violence is committed by men and most victims are women and children. They made connections between sexual violence and male dominance in the economy, politics, the legal system, schools, and churches.<sup>28</sup> They observed that patriarchal structures protect the abuser, and silence or blame the victim.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> A consortium of Mennonite church publications calling themselves “Meetinghouse” developed 17 points for how to report on sexual misconduct. The overarching principle was “How can this story be presented so that it can work toward building rather than tearing down the church?” The guidelines included the issue of accountability when trust in leaders has been violated, and a commitment to report bad news and not just good news. Editors saw the church press serving as a deterrent to abuse.— from J. Lorne Peachey, “Guidelines for Reporting Sexual Misconduct and Other Sensitive News Stories,” *Gospel Herald*, July 4, 1992, 4-5.

<sup>25</sup> J. Lorne Peachey, “Seven Months of Tough Lessons,” *ibid.*, September 29, 1992, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Don Ratzlaff, “Domestic Violence in our Midst,” *The Mennonite*, December 25, 1990, 547.

<sup>27</sup> Don Ratzlaff, “Conference on Domestic Violence Sheds Light on Darkness,” *Gospel Herald*, December 25, 1990, 880.

<sup>28</sup> Tim Castle, “Women Doing Theology: Reflections by a Man,” *Mennonite Reporter*, June 1, 1992, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Janet Main, “Letters: Reporting Abuse Will Protect Others,” *ibid.*, March 23, 1992, 6.

In 1993, several periodicals reported on Carolyn Holderread Heggen's C. Henry Smith lecture, in which she asserted that "We cannot continue to teach a hierarchical model of men and women" and urged her audience "to be braver and bolder about labelling that heresy."<sup>30</sup> Most of the articles that connected violence with patriarchy were written by women but some were written by men.<sup>31</sup> A number of feature articles by men advocated replacing a toxic masculinity with healthier views of what it means to be a man, challenging the harmful stereotypes with which they were raised.<sup>32</sup> A lot of backlash to this discussion of patriarchy arose in letters to the editor, with people defending male headship and female submission as biblical and denouncing feminism as secular and ungodly.<sup>33</sup>

In a close comparative study of the reporting in the *Mennonite Reporter* and the *Canadian Mennonite* in the 1990s and the 2010s, I found that there were just as many first-person stories by survivors in both decades. However, in the 2010s fewer articles used the word "patriarchy." Since 2010 there have been many articles about abuse policies and safe place spaces that do not say anything about gender. This is appropriate for policies, because of course people of all genders can violate a boundary. However, if Mennonites want social change, our public discourse cannot just talk about abuse generically. We must talk about who is doing the abusing and who is being abused.

We see the same problem with racism. We can say, "Racism is bad, we don't want to be racist, stamp out racism!" We might not threaten anyone by saying that. But as soon as we talk about the power dynamics and ask who is harmed and who benefits from racism, then we will see that we live in a society where white people have the most power to disadvantage Black people, indigenous people, and people of color. Social analysis is essential

---

<sup>30</sup> Tom Price, "Therapist Explores Gap Between Peace Theology and Reality," *Mennonite Reporter*, May 17, 1993, 3. Heggen presented the 18th annual C. Henry Smith Lecture at Goshen College on March 16, 1993, titled "Peace on the Homefront." The lecture was drawn from her book: Carolyn Holderread Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> Aiden Schlichting Enns, "Bad Theology Leads to Bad Behavior," *The Mennonite*, April 27, 1993, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Gordon Houser, "Defectors from the Patriarchy," *ibid.*, March 10, 1992, 99.

<sup>33</sup> For example, Ruth Hofstetter, "Jesus Chose 12 Men," *ibid.*, May 12, 1992, 201; Larry Weidman, "Readers Say," *Gospel Herald*, September 8, 1992, 4.

if we are to address inequality. We must talk about power, who has it and who does not. My research indicates that the social analysis in the 1990s was stronger than what we see in church periodical pages lately. What happens to the movement for social change if we are reluctant to talk about power? Power analysis is essential if we want to understand why sexual violence has been tolerated in denominational offices, schools, and churches. When power structures are male dominated, complaints about sexual violence by men are more likely to be ignored or minimized. Survivors of abuse who come forward are silenced, shamed, and punished.

### *Theological reflection*

These Mennonite periodicals discussed a wide range of theological topics related to sexual violence. In the 1990s, numerous articles delved into such questions as: How does the reality of sexual violence shape our understanding of God? Where is God in these stories of sexual violence? and What implications does this have for the church?

For example, scholar Wilma Bailey wrote about how the biblical character Bathsheba has been used through the ages to demonstrate that women are at fault for seducing men. Bailey wrote, "Rape is an ugly fact of life that too many women must face. . . . Women have been afraid to tell their story for fear of being called a harlot, a slut, a seductress, or an idiot." She goes on to say that the church should take active steps to prevent the violation of women: "This might take place in its preaching, teaching, nurturing of its young, and the structuring of its institutions."<sup>34</sup>

Around the same time a cover story by Martha Smith Good juxtaposed a modern narrative of rape with the rape of the biblical character Tamar. She called for justice: "The silence around rape, incest, and other acts of sexual violence against women must be broken. . . . Their pain must be shared. healing must happen. The time is the 1990s!"<sup>35</sup> Other writers looked at Jesus' teaching on dealing with the offenses of church members (Matthew 18:15-17), which has often been interpreted to require abuse survivors to meet privately with people who hurt them instead of going to the police. This

---

<sup>34</sup> Wilma Bailey, "Was Bathsheba a Seductress or a Victim?" *Gospel Herald*, October 27, 1992, 6-7.

<sup>35</sup> Martha Smith Good, "The Rape of Tamar," *ibid.*, May 15, 1990, 336.

interpretation is dangerous for victims of abuse and puts others in danger.<sup>36</sup>

In the pages of the periodicals authors tackled suffering, forgiveness, humility, sexuality, the role of the church community, and worship in the healing process, among other subjects. It is noteworthy that the last decade of reporting about abuse has not included as lively an interaction with biblical texts and the theological tradition as was seen thirty years ago. My hunch is that earlier writers expected strong opposition to their ideas about sexual violence, and so were careful to justify their claims biblically and theologically. Current societal norms more commonly condemn sexual violence; the biblical connections may seem less essential to writers, since they are not expecting opposition.

### Three Significant Gaps

The three recurring themes outlined above were evident in the articles found in Mennonite periodicals, are crucial for recognizing and addressing sexual violence in the Mennonite community, and thus warrant a place in Mennonite peace theology. At the same time, it is equally crucial to consider what is *not* in the periodicals. I discovered three significant gaps that we need to explore in our Mennonite peace theology going forward.

#### *The ethics of fighting back*

First, I came across only one article that gave practical advice about physical attacks, advocating self-defence training for women.<sup>37</sup> We have not begun to talk about the ethics of fighting back. I didn't see any articles discussing strategies for surviving sexual assault or, importantly, for resisting sexual coercion and manipulation. There is still squeamishness about addressing sexual issues even though people urgently need these strategies. Violence continues to afflict people in our churches, especially women and children, and our periodicals are not addressing this crisis. Also, with the exception of a few articles in the 1990s, very little has been written that addresses

---

<sup>36</sup> Two articles that address this portion of Matthew 18: Nancy R. Heisey, "How Do We Confront Sexual Misconduct by Church Leaders," *ibid.*, August 11, 1992, 3; Rachel Waltner Goossen, "The Failure to Bind and Loose: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Abuse," *The Mennonite*, January 2015, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Cathleen Hockman, "Rape Also Happens on the Church College Campus," *Gospel Herald*, September 10, 1991, 2-3.

the people committing sexual assault or challenges the societal training normalizing violence for men.<sup>38</sup> We need practical help with reducing this violence.

#### *Sexual violence and other oppressions*

I found scant discussion about how sexual violence interacts with other forms of oppression in the church. In North American culture, the people most likely to be hurt are not only women and children but people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ people, indigenous, Black and other women of color, and those who are newcomers or economically disadvantaged. When these people are hurt, they are also the least likely to be able to access good medical care or to be treated fairly by the police and the justice system.<sup>39</sup>

Since the mid-1990s, third-wave feminism has paid close attention to the intersection of different forms of violence. Influenced by post-colonial and postmodern thought, this movement is committed to amplifying marginalized voices and de-centering the perspective of white North American women. Despite its broader significance, this perspective is not reflected in the Mennonite periodicals.

#### *Mennonite treatment of LGBTQ+ people*

Finally, while I looked at every article that contained the term “abuse,” I did not find any articles linking this issue with Mennonite treatment of LGBTQ+ people. Mennonite communities have been abusive in their refusal to acknowledge the spectrum of sexual attraction and gender, which has resulted in suffering and mental health crises for countless queer people. This matter has not been covered in the Mennonite press. The pain that these individuals and families experience when they are rejected and expelled from communities, or forced into a strict heterosexual mold, is a type of sexual violence that must be named. This too is about power and

---

<sup>38</sup> I have seen this play out where allegations of sexual assault arise. It is not monsters who commit sexual assault but sometimes model people thriving in every aspect of their lives. Why are “normal” men assaulting women? What is it about our culture that makes this violence socially acceptable? Similarly, a victim may not be believed when she accuses someone of sexual assault, because of stereotypes about who commits this violence.

<sup>39</sup> In the last few years a few articles discussed this but mostly in reference to violence happening outside the Mennonite church.

more specifically about how Mennonites have used community and spiritual power in oppressive and abusive ways.

### **Conclusion**

Although I have addressed the difficult ongoing issue of sexual violence in this article, I will conclude by explaining why I am nevertheless hopeful. The quantitative analysis described above showed a spike of interest in discussing sexual violence in the 1990s. Although church periodicals largely stopped talking about abuse after the early '90s, advocacy about it did not stop. People within the church continued to support victims and walk with those who offended. Sexual abuse policies were written, revised, and implemented. Pastors preached and taught about sexual violence. Theologians explored the roots of sexual violence and the insidious nature of patriarchy in Mennonite thought and institutions. That these activities were not always mentioned in the periodicals does not mean the movement for change stopped: it continued under the radar in pockets here and there throughout the church.

Also, as noted, in the last decade the Mennonite church press has showed renewed interest in this issue. Although the press is not reporting so much on events, conferences, and publications, since these are happening less than in the 1990s, what we do see now is reporting on online advocacy. Patriarchy works when victims are isolated and silenced; however, the internet has slashed through that silence, as survivors can now connect online with other survivors and with organizations that will support them. People who run websites such as IntoAccount, Our Stories Untold, and the Mennonite Abuse Prevention List are doing important practical and theoretical work, and their voices appear in the church press.<sup>40</sup> The location of these advocacy groups outside church structures is a safe place from which to address violence in the church. Today, survivors of abuse can more easily find support than they could even a decade ago. In addition, if someone has committed sexual violence, there is a way forward for that person as well. Mennonites have been at the forefront of creating organizations that support people who have offended, through Circles of Support and Accountability. All this gives me much hope that the church can be a location of healing and hope in our broken world.

---

<sup>40</sup> OurStoriesUntold.com; IntoAccount.org; theMAPlist.org.

This exploration of Mennonite periodicals was fruitful. The statistics I collected revealed the trajectory of the discussion about sexual violence in Mennonite communities, and how grassroots opinions waxed, waned, and changed. I found that storytelling was central, and a feminist social analysis of patriarchy was often used. A wide variety of theological themes were explored by writers over the years. My research has insight for feminist theologians who are tackling sexual violence in the fields of biblical studies, ethics, and systematic theology, as well as for the broader context of Mennonite peace theology. There is a rich substrate of theological work found in periodicals that should not be ignored and needs to be mined for its insights. The church changes slowly, especially around an issue as entrenched as sexual violence; periodicals not only track those changes, they foster change through publishing faithful and prophetic voices. Naming and calling out sexual violence can provoke resistance, but the periodicals show how power structures were changed and molded chip by chip, article by article, as readers were convicted and converted to supporting victims and confronting people who abuse.

My research also revealed that Mennonite communities have not been as practical as they could have been in providing support for people who face violence. The periodicals show there was little attention given to other power structures that oppress and intersect with gendered sexual violence, including prejudice against LGBTQ+ people. These are directions that need serious and sustained attention. There is much work to do as we forge a peace theology that is inclusive of all types of violence and all people.

*Carol Penner is Assistant Professor of Theological Studies and Coordinator of Applied Studies at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario.*