

TGCW21 Round Two Breakout Session: *Compassionate Care in a #MeToo World*

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The #MeToo movement has exposed widespread sexual harassment and brought accountability to those who have misused power and authority. This breakout will provide guidance on how to love our friends as they share with us about past (or current) sexual abuse. We'll explore how to create redemptive communities where women can share their stories of abuse and trauma, and be compassionately helped in the process of healing and transformation available through Christ.

INTRO

As we begin today, I want all of you who are listening who are sufferers and survivors of sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual manipulation...sexual sin done against you: **the heart of this workshop is FOR YOU, ABOUT YOU.** You are not unseen or unknown. Jesus' love, healing, compassion and wisdom for walking forward ARE yours. Many of us have cried with you, sometimes we haven't known what to say or do, when you've struggled to connect God to this part of your story.

Like David maybe you have cried out along the lines of [Psalm 142](#):

With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD. ²I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him.

³When my spirit faints within me, you know my way! In the path where I walk they have hidden a trap for me. ⁴Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul. ⁵I cry to you, O LORD; I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living."⁶Attend to my cry, for I am brought very low! Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me!

THIS IS WHERE YOU FEEL STUCK...UNSEEN, UNKNOWN, ALONE. Yet you long to get to verse 7:

⁷Bring me out of prison, that I may give thanks to your name! The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me.

My focus in this workshop is to care for you by addressing those who want to help you, who sincerely desire to hear your #METOO story and companion you towards Christ and into the healing and freedom that he has for you. Therefore, I'm going to speak directly to friends, church leaders, and family members in your life to help them have understanding and practical tools.

You may want to listen to my talk from the 2014 TGC Women's conference, [The Impact of Sexual Abuse and How God's Grace Heals and Transforms Lives](#), which is available for free on the TGC website. For anyone that wants to simply listen today and not take notes, you can access my speaking notes, along with some recommended resource lists by going to the Harvest USA homepage at harvestusa.org, which is also on the postcard you received. Go there and look for the Steadfast logo. harvestusa.org. The title of the blog you want is "TGCW21 Breakout Session Notes"

So friends, where do we begin in the face of so much PAIN, so many SCANDALS, so many news headlines and stories that trigger many emotions. **Anger:** *what!?* More broken trust as the vulnerable were taken advantage of? **Disbelief:** *Nooo! Are you kidding me? They covered this up...for years?! For the sake of money...reputation...ministry plans...all at the expense of untold numbers of devastated*

women. **Brokenhearted sorrow.** *It's sobering and gut-wrenching even as we admire all those who have come forward saying, ME TOO.*

I'm not an abuse survivor but I've heard many horrific stories of sexual abuse that have stunned my heart and mind. Harvest USA's ministry offers biblical discipleship to people seeking help regarding personal battles with sexual sin, but the majority of them have been sinned against sexually. And as we seek to know them, their stories of being sexually abused come out—sometimes for the first time.

Sexual abuse does violence against individuals in profoundly personal, body-affecting, soul-bruising ways. And you don't have to be employed in some form of ministry to hear about it. As we develop meaningful relationships, our friends, women in our churches, family members, and coworkers may trust us with personal stories of abuse; stories that may stun us, break our hearts, and push the boundaries of what we thought can happen in the midst of Christian contexts.

I want to define what sexual abuse is and then give you 5 ways to come alongside hurting women.

FIRST: WHAT IS SEXUAL ABUSE? What are we talking about when we use this phrase? What does the hashtag of METOO and CHURCHTOO refer to? **Two thoughts:**

1. First, **people.** More than a hashtag or news headlines, this is about girls, boys, women and men who have endured an evil form of suffering, a splash of hell that is evidence of the kingdom of darkness, **our true enemy**, showing its temporary reign over this earth. HOWEVER, this form of suffering is understood by Jesus and for which **He came as Healer, Comforter and Redeemer.** *Our focus today is on women survivors and the healing that Jesus can bring, yes, our Savior who said, "I have come to bind up the brokenhearted and to set the captives free, and I will bring beauty from your ashes and give joy to replace your mourning."* (Isaiah 61:1-4)
2. Second, **sexual abuse refers to a wide range of contact and interactions.** *It consists of any sexual activity —verbal, visual, or physical— engaged in without consent. Abuse against a girl or woman occurs when someone more powerful or older sexually exploits her for the satisfaction of the abuser's desires. It is **always sin** on the part of the abuser, and **NOT sin** on behalf of the girl or woman who is abused.*

How should we respond when someone tells us about present or past sexual abuse, assault, harassment? **Consider five ideas** as starting points to compassionately care as individuals and churches.

1. **Open Our Hearts and Eyes:** This is REAL and more widespread than most of us realize.

It's been just over 3 years since [Rachel Denhollander's brave testimony](#) led to the conviction of a man who hurt hundreds of girls over decades. Many other horrific stories have come to light from various corners of the Christian church including entire denominations, individual churches and organizations. **Most of these** abuse scandals have shared two common threads: the abused were not initially believed or listened to which resulted in retraumatizing those who came forward and the abuse continuing sometimes for decades, and second, people in positions of power and influence lived duplicitous, unchecked, unaccountable lives as master deceivers.

When the news broke about [Ravi Zacharias](#), a globally known Christian leader whose sexual sin came to light after his death, I prayed for the hurting ones who were most likely being triggered by the news headlines...because for all those who have bravely come forward, less than 25% of all sexual assaults are actually reported.¹ **There are many reasons for this:** fear of not being believed, threatened into silence, embarrassment, and intrusive, re-victimizing medical and legal procedures. **So, realize that there are MANY silent suffering survivors all around us. Proverbs 31:8 (NIV) says, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.”**

Friends, you’re here and listening online because you DO care, so you may not need to hear this first point but it’s so important that I HAD to include it. THERE IS SO MUCH AT STAKE IF we choose to not face the depth and width of this painful reality, or want to keep our heads in the sand. To turn away from stories of abuse is to turn away from Christ himself, who identifies with the oppressed and weak. Think about Jesus’ ministry as we read in the gospels: he went to those who others turned away from and saw them, knew them, drew near to them with healing and holy affection and words of life and transformation. As his followers, we go with him into the bruised and broken places in the lives of others.

Pray that God will give you a courageous willingness and the compassion you’ll need to bear the weight of hearing MeToo, ChurchToo stories; stories which you may struggle to comprehend how people can do such things to others. The stories are real, and they show up every Sunday, at every women’s Bible study, at the women’s retreat, in your seminary classes, and here at this TGC conference. In Christ, *through Christ*, we have what we need to be a safe place for hurting women when they open up to us.

2. Second, Listen Patiently and Learn Compassionately: Your Initial Step Is Not to Give Answers

Before you say anything about a woman’s pain, it’s important to understand that they have a UNIQUE experience. Don’t assume you know what THIS woman in front of you is feeling and thinking simply because you’ve read books and articles, or attended a workshop like this one! Each girl and woman’s story is unique in the way it inflicts deep wounds, affecting her heart, thought life, her ‘relationship to her body’, the way she views herself, others, God and life itself. **Your first act of love is to listen—to learn what happened to a person and what kind of help she needs NOW.**

With listening, you want to tell them *you believe them and that you are so sorry they suffered in this way. NOW is not the time for lots of questions, interrogation in the name of “the more I know the more I can help you”.* **NOT initially.** Listen, affirm their pain, and affirm their story of what may be unbelievable evil...except it’s real. It’s their real story. *Are there instances of women sharing stories or details that aren’t actually true? Yes...there are, we can’t deny that. But when a woman comes to you, your role is not to stand as judge. God knows what’s what: trust him.*

Ask God to help you listen with love as you gently invite someone to be known. Most likely, it will be **extremely difficult for them to find words to speak the unspeakable**, bringing to light things hidden in the dark for years, perhaps decades. Healing will take time, and there are sorrows, consequences, and scars that will likely remain for a long time, if not for the rest of her earthly life.

¹ <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>

Remember, your first responsibility isn't to heal or fix, but to engage with listening love. **What is "wise listening"?** Here are 4 things to keep in mind:

1. **Invite her to share, to give voice to her suffering on her terms.** Often abuse STEALS and SILENCES a woman's sense of voice.
 - a. So, a woman asks to speak with you and shares that she was abused as a little girl and has never talked about it. You might ask her, "Do you want to share more now, or wait?" Also, you can say, "I'll learn your story, as you want to share it, when you want to say it". Meaning, maybe she'll verbally tell you over the course of several meetings. Perhaps she'll write it out and have you read it, or she'll read it to you. Let her lead the way and if she doesn't know how to answer any of these questions, don't press her. Affirm that you care, and are here to listen and help...including connecting her with someone else if she needs.
 - b. **What if she shares that she's in a sexually abusive marriage? Or that she was raped or assaulted last week...or yesterday?** These represent a crisis situation that requires immediate triage care. More on that in a bit.
2. So invite her to share on her terms. **Second**, and I've learned this the hard way, **Don't assume that what you typically do in Christian discipleship ministry is best for her** (*prayer, scripture, asking lots of questions, sharing about yourself*). Many who were abused by a Christian leader in a faith-based environment often had biblical vocabulary, concepts and practices used AGAINST her in horrible, unbiblical ways. A woman I helped years ago, Laina, shared with me how her older, female mentor always opened their times in prayer and then proceeded to molest Laina, all in the context of supposedly helping her with body image issues. So, when I offered to "open in prayer", Laina courageously told me that this was a *trigger for her*. So we need to SLOW DOWN, ASK if she knows what would be most comfortable for her, and LISTEN: would it be ok if you prayed? Or read a passage of Scripture? Or _____? Don't let this point scare or paralyze you! God's Spirit, our Wonderful Counselor will gently guide you. Pray in your heart, "Lord lead me with your love right now...help me to BE and SPEAK safety to her."
3. **Third, realize she may mentally disconnect from the conversation as you are talking.** Many abuse survivors endured their suffering mentally by disconnecting, or what is often referred to as *disassociation* from their experience of abuse by retreating and going inside themselves mentally or fixating in their thoughts outside their circumstances so as to escape what was happening to them. When present day circumstances or incidents 'trigger' the thoughts/sensations of the abuse, she may instinctively retreat to those escapes. It might seem like all of a sudden she has exited your conversation and gone elsewhere. She has! Stay with her, wait...and gently assure her you're listening.
4. **Fourth: Offer to meet or talk again tomorrow, or next week or ____.** **Follow-up is key!** She has just invited you into a part of her heart and life that is SIGNIFICANT. This is not a conversation to end with, "I'll pray for you...call me if you need anything." She may not want to, or be ready to talk further about it. She may already have a helper in her life. I'm encouraging you to receive what she is entrusting to you (her story) and assure her that you're holding it and desire to "hold it well" even if you're not sure what that looks like.

These are ways to listen actively and wisely. We've seen that compassionate care is having our hearts open to the reality of this suffering all around us, and to love first with listening.

That leads us to our third step:

3. Lean on Jesus: You Can't Love Wisely Without His Help

Friends, let this comfort AND humble you: ***You must depend on Jesus and on others who are part of his church.*** Caring for abuse survivors is beyond anyone's singular ability. David Powlison, the wise biblical counselor said, "Never underestimate someone else's suffering, and never overestimate your ability to help". Our own feeble reserves of love, compassion and good intentions are insufficient to lament with and care for people in this deep pain. We need radical wisdom and strength from outside ourselves: **we need our Savior and Redeemer.** Listen to what Scripture proclaims, not only for survivors but for those who want to help them:

- The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble [Ps. 9:9](#).
- The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. [Psalm 34:18](#)
- When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. [Matthew 9:36](#)

As helpers, we also need mature believers to **support us** as we support our hurting friend. God doesn't expect you to become a trauma specialist overnight, or to enter in as someone's **therapist or pastor**. BUT, you can offer to help connect this woman with those who can help her in specific ways that perhaps you're not ready for, not equipped to offer. **YOU need to hope in Christ too and take yourself off the hook from assuming ownership or responsibility for things that God alone can do!**

Let's zoom out for a minute and remember: *through Christ she does have the very real possibility to experience Hope, Healing and Restoration...the redemption of her suffering. This means that you are NOT her redeemer, that you DON'T have the power to heal her heart and undo her scars. BUT, you can be a tool in the hand of Jesus who is the source of:*

1. **Hope** – Because our God is the God of ALL hope, the redemption of sexual abuse is possible. We have a Redeemer who knows and loves us and He *is* what hurting women need. ***In Isaiah 45:3 God says, "I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places so that you may know I am the Lord...who calls you by name."*** In the Bible, you find Jesus with those who were betrayed, abandoned, abused, ridiculed and rejected...as He was himself through the cross. He knows your name, and your story and He wants to give you hope that you can share with others.
2. **Jesus is also the source of true Healing** – what happened to a woman who comes to you for help ***can't be undone***, but she can be healed by the God of all comfort ***over time***. He is able to lead you as you guide her towards the healing process.
3. **And then, Jesus is also our source of lasting Restoration—his resurrection life made real in us!** - We've just celebrated our Lord's glorious ministry and work through the cross and his defeat of sin, death and suffering. **It's fascinating to me that in the world of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) research, there is discussion of "post-traumatic growth syndrome" or the**

positive changes that occur in some people after experiencing traumatic events. There are people who become more resilient, stronger, wiser, compassionate human beings as they walk through the healing process. As a believer in Jesus, if you walk with those who have suffered profoundly and perhaps experienced your own traumatic pain, you have the opportunity to have a front row seat in this miracle of the gospel. That is, it's possible, through Christ, for traumatized people to come to terms with their inability to heal themselves, to rescue themselves from horrific memories. **In this utter dependence upon God and with journey companions alongside them, women can experience beauty rising up from their ashes, their silenced and shamed voices speaking UP and OUT, like David said in Psalm 142: being brought out of the prison of their pain and brought into a spacious place.** We can't promise a woman that she will experience this on this earth, but we can hold it in our hearts with faithful prayer. This is the power and the promise of the resurrection!

This leads us into #4:

4. Provide Spiritual *and* Practical Care: Help Them Take the Next Step

On this point, it's a beautiful provision of God that we are his family, spiritual siblings created to bear each others burdens TOGETHER. ***Just because you're the first person they tell doesn't mean you ought to be the last.***

Spiritual help and practical care are two sides of the same coin. When we provide holistic help, we reflect our Savior, who ministered to both souls and also bodies. As you listen to someone's story, **pay attention to clues for how they need help now.** Pray and ask God to help you discern the most immediate next step.

Especially if the abuse is recent, but even if months or years have passed, consider these issues:

- **Is she safe? Don't assume!** Again, if you access my speaker's notes at harvestusa.org, I've provided links to helpful resources that time prevents me from unpacking now.
- **Does she have immediate medical needs?** Should you take her to the hospital?
- **Does she need to file a police report?** Could you accompany her to the police station or call 911 for her?
- **Is she scared of being alone?** Could you or another friend stay with or host her for a night, a few days or even a week or two?
- **Is there someone else who could also help her navigate her situation and its effects**—a pastor, church leader, counselor, relative, or friend? Could you suggest getting assistance?
- **For the long-term, an abuse survivor** will likely need care from someone with expertise in trauma counseling, and trusted others who can help share the burden of this person's pain.
- **DO NOT think that you need to give attention to all of these in your first meeting!** I'm mentioning them as ideas to have on your radar.

WHICH LEADS TO OUR FINAL POINT, #5:

5. Develop a Resource Library of People, Care and Information at Your Church

Care for those who have suffered abuse of any kind is one of the ways we identify with Jesus, participate in the kingdom of God going forward and make disciples of all the nations! This is a Great Commission and a Great Command path for us, sisters. To love the Lord with a courageous, sacrificial devotion as we love our hurting neighbors by helping them understand and apply the healing and transformation of the gospel, that is, the very person of Jesus Christ. There are many in the church who are bound up in the pain, shame, and scars of their abuse, and Jesus wants them to be set free to flourish in his love and purposes for their lives!

To that end, it's vital for churches to have a trustworthy resource library of people and materials that are able to address sexual abuse and assault honestly, biblically and practically. Here are some ideas:

1. PEOPLE:

- **Trained counselors** who understand both the impact of trauma and the path forward into healing and restoration. Develop a list of people that survivors can be referred to for professional level care which is often needed.
- **Lay helpers** who are gifted to come alongside survivors with a growing understanding of the impact of sexual abuse, and the path forward. I can't recommend highly enough the material of Diane Langberg, and especially her book and the accompanying workbook, "On the Threshold of Hope". This is a great resource both to educate those who are NOT survivors, and a very gentle book for a survivor to work through with a trusted friend or in a support group setting.
- **Prayer warriors:** who are people who may not feel gifted or ready to come directly alongside a survivor, but are passionate to pray on their behalf?
- **Helpful hands:** similarly, are there people who cannot offer direct ministry but may have practical ways to help: short-term housing, finances (for counseling, housing, etc.), providing meals and babysitting, etc. These are generally areas of care for the diaconate in local churches so if your church already has an active deacon ministry, follow up with them to find out if this area of care is on their radar screen.

2. Second, RESOURCES:

- **Books and other materials for a trustworthy reading list** for the purpose of education and equipping. I've mentioned Diane Langberg's material already but there are others! I have a recommended resource list, which will be available on the Harvest USA website, as I mentioned earlier. Look that up and add to it.
- **Organizations** that provide information, counseling, education. I've put some of these on the resource list. I want to specifically mention GRACE, which stands for Godly Response to Abuse in a Christian Environment. This ministry is an excellent resource that helps churches think through this area of ministry in detail and with biblical wisdom.

Sisters, this may seem daunting and in our own power, personal supply of love, courage and wisdom, it IS! However, let's remember the beautiful promise of **Ephesians 1:22-23-**

²² And [God] put all things under [the feet of Jesus] and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

ALL things are under the feet and redemptive power of Jesus. While we live on this earth, we will continue to experience the kingdom of darkness personally and in the lives of others through splashes of hell such as sexual abuse and assault. However, JESUS, not sexual abuse, will have the last word. The voice of JESUS, not pain or suffering or shame, will be the final, beautiful sound we have ringing in our ears. What an honor, that he has invited us, and sent us out in his name with the power of his Spirit to speak, love, care and companion hurting, suffering women!

Let's pray.