

## Open, accessible, and Safe Church

HANNAH FOULGER

Photo: Sara Krahn

Last month, the Anglican Church of Canada was rocked by the resignation of Rev. Mark MacDonald, national Indigenous archbishop. This comes at a time when members of the ACC, both nationally and at the diocesan level, are working to develop and implement Safe Church policies for our members. It's necessary for these policies to be in place to respond to allegations, prevent further harm, and to respond in a way in keeping with our calling to live like Christ.

"The power of the Gospel is so easily warped. The power of the gospel and the power of what we wield is for truth, beauty, good and right, relationship and justice in the world," Rev. Eileen Scully, the Director of Faith, Worship and Ministry for General Synod, says.

**"Sometimes these Earthen vessels can warp what is so good into powerful destructive evil, a power that creates residential school systems and maintains white supremacy," Scully says. "We need standards that hold us, correct us. We need to continually be formed and reformed and to check our own behaviours."**

### Internationally

Anglicans worldwide have recognized the need for policies that protect and fight against such evils. The Anglican Safe Church Commission was established by request of the Anglican Consultative Council in 2016, at their meeting in Lusaka, Nigeria. This international body is made up of clergy representation from

165 countries, including Rev. Mary Wells from Canada, a social worker and special witness to cases of abuse in the church. The group aims to promote the safety of children, young people and vulnerable adults. During the first phase of the ASCC in 2016-2019 reviewed the safeguarding policies currently in place and developed new international guidelines. In 2019, these guidelines were approved by the Anglican Consultative Council. These guidelines focused on five points:

- Providing support where there is abuse
- Implementing effective responses to abuse
- Adopting and promoting standards for the practice of Ministry
- Assessing suitability for ministry
- Promoting a culture of safety

In the ACC, adoption of these victim-centred standards emphasizes pastoral support along with effective policies and procedures in response to allegations of sexual misconduct. With these victim-centred supports in mind, Wells and Scully reviewed diocesan policies in 2018-2019 and drew up a report card which was delivered to each diocese. Quebec scored among the highest and the northern dioceses, along with Rupert's Land, scored on the low end.

## Diocese of Rupert's Land

The Diocese of Rupert's Land installed their first sexual misconduct policy in the early 90s. At that time the diocese created the position of Pastor for Healthy Communities. This position not only included responding to allegations of sexual misconduct but also bullying and abuse of power within parishes. Our current Pastor for Healthy Communities, Mary Holmen, was appointed by Don Phillips and reappointed by Bishop Geoff.

When Holmen was appointed, she recognized that the diocesan policy for abuse and bullying needed revisions, as it was confusing and full of redundancies. She attempted to make it as user friendly as possible, reframing the power dynamic to be in the hands of the complainants. When reviewed by a human rights/employment lawyer, however, she learned that the policy was missing a Respectful Workplace policy which is required by Manitoba law. When reviewed again, a section on protection and safety of children and vulnerable adults was removed to focus on sexual misconduct, harassment, exploitation, and abuse, instead making it its own policy. The charter of the ACSS has been adopted for the Diocese of Rupert's land but the Rupert's Land specific policy is still under review to make it work as best as possible.

"The vision for a safe church policy is that we need to make the church a place of safety for everybody, where everybody is treated with dignity and respect. The policy should also cover other misconduct which is not sexual in nature, such as bullying and misuse of social media, as well as guidelines for children and youth programming, as well as elder abuse," Holmen says. "The respectful workplace policy covers people who work for the church, either paid or volunteer, but the safe church policy would be for participants and recipients of ministry."

Holmen would particularly like the Safe Church Policy to influence people who are active in the church, and to provide them with ongoing awareness of potential harm. "The reality is that



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sometimes we heart each other. We need ways of dealing with and preventing that.”

One of the ways forward is to make sure the reviewed policy is easily accessible to anyone in the diocese. Scully says,

**“One of the critical things that the Safe Church Commission talks about that is standard, good procedure, is that a diocesan policy and avenues for complaints ought to be really easy to find on a diocesan website. If you can’t find it, that’s an indication of problems in the system.”**

The church of England has produced some accessible, easy to find resources, both in parishes and online about spotting abuse of power in the church, what to do when someone has experienced misconduct, and how to proceed. Scully says that parishes should have notices posted to indicate they have signed onto the safe church charter.

At the centre of all this policy development and dissemination, Scully says, should be the theological foundation. “People of faith are called to right relationship with each other. Rules and policy matter, but it’s not going to get into our souls. As rules of behaviour, it needs to be preached, it needs to be lived, it needs to be rooted in our Gospel.” Scully says. “There’s a

clause that says we will adopt and promote by education and training standards for the practice of pastoral ministry and other church personnel, which means integrating safe church training as part of formative theological education. That is the responsibility of the diocese and the theological college.”

Mary Holmen and the rest of the working group at Rupert’s Land are working to develop an effective Safe Church policy which reflects the Gospel to which we are all called.

“We are all created in the divine image. When a person is harmed, whether it’s sexual violation or other kinds of harm, it’s a violation of that underlying image. A child of God is deserving of love and care, and one who has been abused has been treated in ways that are not consistent with that,” Holmen says. “So we’ve failed in our calling. We’re supposed to care for one another. Speaking the truth in love means calling others to account. That’s who we’re called to be as church: to care for the weakest and most vulnerable.”

**If you are experiencing or are aware of sexual misconduct within the Diocese of Rupert’s Land, you can contact Mary Holmen, the Pastor for Healthy Communities at 204.453.3279**

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