

Confronting Sexual Abuse in the Anglican Church of Canada: Social Gospel Feminists

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This is the first in a series of stories about how women in Anglican Canada initiated responses to sexual abuse within their church. Here one meets Marjorie Watson Powles and Jeanne Rowles, whose personal and professional stories were born of the Social Gospel movement and nurtured by the overseas missionary service that marked Canadian church life from the close of the Great War to the politically turbulent 1960s and the rise of feminism. Along with Donna Hunter, Mary Wells, Marsha Hewitt, and Kate Merriman, Marjorie and Jeanne worked collaboratively and consistently in the final decades of the twentieth century to transform the Anglican Church on behalf of women and children, confronting sexual abuse in the ministry and holding church leaders accountable for sexual misconduct in ministry relationships.

In 2002, when Wendy Fletcher-Marsh published her research on the status of women in the Anglican Church of Canada two decades after the ordination of women (1976-96), she found that in the 1980s there was a spike in reports of sexual harassment among women preparing for ministry. In this study of women clergy, *Like Water on a Rock*, Fletcher-Marsh found that women born between 1940 and 1959 were the most likely to report the experiences of sexual harassment; 76 percent of all women clergy reporting sexual harassment were ordained in the 1980s.¹ Women who entered ministry in this decade faced professors, mentors, and supervisors who used professional privilege and social leverage in a close knit Anglican community to harass and abuse female students, trainees,

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and candidates for ordination. When unforeseen incidents of sexual harassment threatened the ability of female ministry candidates to fulfill preparation requirements and endorsement for ordination, they turned to women in their Trinity Divinity community for counsel and support.

Marjorie Powles at Trinity

In the 1980s, Marjorie Powles was invariably found in the Trinity Divinity Common Room on Friday mornings, following the Eucharist. A circle of women formed around her on these mornings reflecting on language, the scriptures, or happenings in the academic community, from a feminist perspective. She modeled collaborative leadership and brought a feminist analysis of power to church hierarchal structures dominated by men, many with social entitlements that enhanced their power and authority, keeping women and their voices marginal to church leadership. These Friday morning groups offered a critical feminist perspective on the church, theology, and the sociocultural systems embedded in Canadian Anglicanism. Marjorie Powles functioned as an agent of change for women and the church. No longer employed in either faith or education programs, she worked and networked within Canada's Anglican community, using her freedom as a retired colleague and clergy spouse to move fluidly through power structures of church and academy with experience, conviction, and skill. Trinity's women trusted Marjorie Powles. Indeed, in 1992, the University of Trinity College conferred on her the degree of Doctor of Sacred Letters *honoris causa* for her lifelong ministry in support of women within the church and outside of it.

Marjorie Agnes Watson

To a Strange Land, her autobiography published in 1993, gives us a picture of Marjorie Powles' early life in Winnipeg and her introduction to the Student Christian Movement (SCM), a formative experience that shaped her life and ministry.² As she was writing this book, however, the later life and work of Marjorie Powles was just beginning. Much of what she accomplished in these Toronto years, from the late 1980s to the early-twenty-first century, I learned about in an interview with Marjorie in 2007 in the Cavell Gardens apartment she and her husband Cyril called home in Vancouver.³

Marjorie Agnes Watson was born in Saskatoon in 1914, where her

parents, Agnes McKnight and Mark Watson, had moved in 1910 from North Dakota. A year later, the Watson family moved to Winnipeg, where Mark managed a lumber business. The McKnights were from Ontario, Presbyterians and political Liberals. Mark Watson was a Methodist, and, according to Marjorie, a small "I" liberal. They belonged to the Home Street Presbyterian Church, which, in 1925, voted for church union and became a United Church. Marjorie recalled the Winnipeg of her youth as a small and snobbish city, where social status depended on money rather than inherited family prestige.⁴ European immigrants lived in the northeast of the city, meaning north of Portage Avenue, but the Watsons lived south of Portage. Her awareness of social divisions increased when she entered the University of Manitoba in 1930 at age sixteen, to find large numbers of Jewish students, excluded from social clubs, and not a single Jewish professor in the university.⁵ Her most significant and enduring experience in university was the Student Christian Movement. She wrote of this as "a liberating experience, both intellectually and socially." "Through it I experienced the joys of group activities and the development of friendships with both men and women based on similar concerns: personal, social, intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic."⁶ The SCM contributed significantly to her convictions about justice and feminism; SCM colleagues across Canada became her social network for the next seven decades. In an interview in 2007, when asked about the collaboration of former SCM colleagues in the religious and political life of the Canada, Marjorie observed that in the 1930s Canada's population was about ten million; finding and maintaining colleagues and collaborators was not as challenging as in a country of thirty five million in the first decade of the twenty-first century.⁷ She received her BA in 1934, in the midst of the Depression, and, for the next eight years, assisted her father with his business. She also volunteered, through SCM, at All People's Mission, founded by J.S. Woodsworth in Winnipeg's north end.⁸ The Woodsworths, then retired from All People's, hosted SCM gatherings in their home, now the Centre for Christian Studies. In 1936 Marjorie joined the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), Canada's first socialist political party. In 2007 she claimed still to have her CCF membership card signed by Stanley Knowles, a former classmate, fellow SCM member, and United Church minister.⁹

In 1942 Marjorie Watson left Winnipeg to study at the United Church Training College in Toronto (UCTS), affiliated with Emmanuel College and the University of Victoria at the University of Toronto.

Marjorie attributes her conviction that “women are equal to men and must be treated as equals” to the women at UTCS and to the SCM.¹⁰ She was on the National Executive of the SCM, and began her ecumenical involvement with the World Student Christian Federation (WCSF). In September 1943 Marjorie Watson was appointed SCM General Secretary at McGill University. Her advocacy for women began in Montreal, along with a colleague, Harriet Christie, who later became a United Church minister and principal of Covenant College, now the Centre for Christian Studies. One of the programs they shaped was called a Feminar.¹¹ It was through SCM in Montreal that Marjorie Watson met Cyril Powles, his parents, and siblings. The Powles were an Anglican missionary family from Japan, home in Montreal during World War Two. In post-war North America, Marjorie Watson’s story might have ended in 1946 when she married Cyril Powles, or perhaps in 1949, when, after language training at Harvard, they left for Japan with infant son John. They remained in Japan for the next twenty years, adding son Peter to their family, returning occasionally to Canada for study leave or to care for aging parents.

The post war growth of Canada’s suburbia in the twenty years during which the Powles were in Japan took women out of the flow of mainstream social, political, and church life, kept at home in new suburban communities not readily accessible to one another except by automobile. For a look into the Anglican Church during the absence of the Powles, one need only read Pierre Berton’s *The Comfortable Pew*.¹² Women’s issues emerged in the 1960s and were addressed in the Royal Commission on the Status of Women report in 1970 with 167 recommendations. The following year the National Action Committee (NAC) on the Status of Women was formed as a pressure group to lobby for the implementation of this report. The NAC grew into the largest feminist organization in Canada with over 700 women’s groups claiming affiliation by 1997, and throughout the 1980s it received 90 percent of its funding from the federal government.¹³

The Powles’ return to Canada in 1970 rekindled former ties for Marjorie and Cyril, augmented by new colleagues and friendships, some formed through shared work in Japan. The extended Powles family contributed to this vast network of relationships in Canada and the United Kingdom, all concerned with making the world a better place for all people. They worked and worshiped ecumenically and engaged in theological reflection and discussion with one another about the course of their lives and ministries. Many former SCM colleagues were now

academics, as well as civic and church leaders.

Women in Groups and Groups of Women

Marjorie Powles met Jeanne Rowles in Toronto through the Movement for Christian Feminism (MCF) to which both women belonged in the 1970s. This ecumenical “consciousness raising” movement was led by Shelley Finson of the United Church, then Director of Field Education at the Centre for Christian Studies.¹⁴ No doubt MCF involvement contributed to the critical perspective Marjorie brought to discussions at Trinity College a decade later. From Trinity she also advocated for women across all the divinity schools at the Toronto School of Theology (TST), organizing Women in Theology, a lecture series by feminist theologians from TST member faculties.

In the late 1980s Marjorie Powles, together with Jeanne Rowles, gathered a small group of Anglican women to reflect on women transforming the church. Through the Women’s Unit at Church House, a video, *Christian and Feminist*, was created and released in 1989, incorporating interviews with Anglican women across Canada, as well as a panel discussion on feminism and the church.¹⁵ In 1992 this small group hosted a forum with the Sisters of St. John the Divine, for the women candidates on Toronto’s ballot for election as Canada’s first female bishop. This group, early in the twenty-first century, established an award at the Toronto School of Theology for women studying theology from a feminist perspective, in the name of Marjorie Watson Powles.¹⁶ When Marjorie and Cyril moved to Vancouver, the church women continued to meet, calling themselves “The Marjorie Group.”

The Bishop’s Committee on the Sexual Harassment of Women Clergy

In 1991, about the time of Anita Hill’s testimony about sexual harassment from Clarence Thomas in the United States, Marjorie Powles was appointed Chair of the Bishop’s Committee on the Sexual Harassment of Women Clergy. This committee was formed by then Bishop of Toronto, Terence Finlay. Marjorie’s appointment came in part from her relationship with Donna Hunter, the first woman to serve on the Toronto Diocesan executive. Marjorie had consulted Hunter when advocating for Trinity women about harassment experiences in ministry training and service. Hunter had been charged with creating and overseeing a task force leading

to policy and procedures on diocesan responses to allegations and complaints of sexual misconduct. As John Doyle pointed out in a review of *Confirmation*, a 2016 film about that historic event, none of the powerful politicians knew how to deal with the issue of sexual harassment: “They were dismissive or clueless or both.”¹⁷ The issue for Anita Hill, as for most women bringing forward complaints of sexual harassment, shifted from her testimony to protecting the dignity of Clarence Thomas, the alleged offender. Without policies and protocols to address the needs of victims/complainants, the interests of the accused and his community invariably take precedence in the eyes of adjudicating bodies. This dynamic was at work in the 2016 trial of CBC’s Jian Ghomeshi; the “dismissal” of women speaking out about harassment has not changed in twenty-five years.¹⁸

With Marjorie Powles as chair, the Bishop’s Committee organized a gathering of women clergy and ordination candidates from Toronto and neighboring dioceses in September 1991. This session gave the committee and participants a sense of the scope of harassment, as experiences were shared, with confidentiality, among the participants. In November, the committee sent letters to the bishops of dioceses represented in the September gathering, citing examples of harassment reported by the women in September: Inappropriate touching of women’s bodies (i.e. unwelcome hugging and feeling of women’s bodies during the Peace, patting women’s buttocks, unwanted hand holding as gestures of greeting), sexual comments in the guise of a joke, overt and subtle invitations, sexual references in the guise of compliments (pertaining to dress and appearance in liturgical garb, and possessive descriptions of women – i.e. “don’t touch her, she’s my curate”). The letter further reminded the bishops that sexual harassment is an abuse of power, and thus is violence against women. “In that light we call on the Church to examine its own power structures and its understanding and practice of authority.”¹⁹

In February 1992 the committee met with the Toronto College of Bishops to request that the bishops contact deans of Ontario’s theological colleges to consider offering courses in feminist theology, and giving such courses visible support. The Toronto bishops told the committee to take their issues to the Ontario Provincial Council on Theological Education (OPCOTE).²⁰ Two years later a presentation was finally made to OPCOTE. Marsha Hewitt spoke on behalf of the committee describing the fundamental issues underlying the problems of female clergy. Some were identified, including unchallenged theological assumptions and world

views that privileged maleness as a taken-for-granted attribute of Divinity that attached to the male priest, and that there was an intrinsic, often unconscious connection between these assumptions that operated a powerful force that structured relations within the church that privileged maleness as the decisive element of normative humanity. The crux of the matter was that women were vulnerable to sexual harassment because they were not taken seriously as priests, a problem which was reflective of a larger socio-cultural problem where women were not taken seriously as human beings. The presentation concluded that sexual harassment arose from distorted attitudes towards women embedded in some basic theological beliefs; changing these beliefs involved re-examining the image of God, of humanity and the Divine, of human relations, as well as theological symbols, God language, Christological assumptions, our church structures, and relations of power.²¹

Jeanne Rowles at Church House

Jeanne Rowles met me for an interview in her Toronto home in September 2007, and began with a description of growing up on a farm during the dust bowl years in Saskatchewan:

It was a time of great poverty and desperation for everyone. I didn't belong to anything. We did go to church faithfully by horse and buggy in the summer and sleigh in the winter and, you know, Saskatchewan was a pretty radical place! My mother was a feminist. She had worked in the Stella Mission (All Peoples) in the north end of Winnipeg before she married. My mother told how she had been assigned to find the biggest Bible she could for J.S. Woodsworth to take with him to court – to read from in his defense. I don't think I ever asked what he was accused of but I knew it was from in his defense. I don't think I ever asked what he was accused of but I knew it was important justice work. My father had three cousins who were formidable women. The one with whom I had the most contact worked for the university extension service travelling around the province working with groups of women. She later became the director of women (I don't remember what it was called) at the university. So in the family we were socially conscious. I knew about the founding and growth of the CCF (Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, 1932) and never even thought of voting for any party but the CCF-NDP. I remember the family listening to the radio when

Tommy Douglas was elected.²²

Jeanne attended the University of Saskatchewan, receiving her BA in 1947. She worked for the YWCA upon graduation, first serving with the Farm Service Corps in Niagara, Ontario. There she contracted polio. As she recovered she continued with the YWCA in Kingston, Ontario, and was supported in earning an MSW from the University of Toronto in 1952. “Once I started to work for the YWCA I was into both social justice and feminism big time. We always had to fight against the take-over by the YMCA, which was neither feminist nor actively into social justice – we often came into those unions in the best financial situation and ended up serving tea!”²³ With the YWCA, she went overseas to Karachi, Pakistan, where she served for three years, training a Pakistani to take her role. Jeanne then moved to Tanzania, where the YWCA partnered with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and again she was responsible for preparing local staff to take YWCA leadership. After four years in Tanzania, Jeanne returned to Canada in 1970 and worked for Central Neighbourhood House in Toronto for the next seven years. In Toronto, Jeanne belonged to the Movement for Christian Feminism. “We lived and breathed it. We read Phyllis Trible, Schussler Fiorenza, and all the others.”²⁴

Putting a Spotlight on Women

When Jeanne Rowles came to Church House, as the Office of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada is now known, Edward “Ted” Scott was Primate of the Anglican Church in Canada. Scott, a former member of SCM, was known for his social justice positions, and Jeanne wanted to work within that ethos, building ecumenical coalitions for social justice, many of which remain today. In our 2007 interview, thirty years after coming to Church House, Jeanne remarked that the Women’s Unit was “a thorn in the side of the church.”²⁵ The unit was charged not only to administer women’s organizations like the Anglican Church Women, which traced its origins to Roberta Tilton in 1885, but also to foster and further the interests of women in the church.²⁶ Jeanne astutely perceived the challenges women brought to the church and the challenges the church presented to women.

Almost immediately upon coming to Church House, Jeanne was asked for advice by a newly ordained woman on responding to violence

against women. This priest told Jeanne that women were coming to clergy with experiences of domestic violence and abuse, and male clergy were sending them back into abusive homes and relationships. Jeanne formed a task force with the Women's Unit on violence against women. This group held workshops across the country. According to Jeanne, at that time, 1979, there was general agreement that about 10 percent of all women were in battered or abusive situations. Jeanne noted, from debriefing the workshops held on the subject, that at least 10 percent of women attending the workshops had been battered; thus the real numbers of women in abusive relationships must have been higher than that estimate.²⁷ The task force brought its report to General Synod in 1986, the year Ted Scott retired as primate, only to have Scott himself dress "us down as alarmists, making too big a thing of it."²⁸

Published in 1987, this report remains a matter of record for the Anglican Church in combating abuse, and naming the church as well as the state as complicit in violence against women. The Anglican Church of Canada was called to acknowledge its participation in violence against women through theologies that supported notions of male superiority, its use of exclusive language, and an historic tendency to support a pattern of dominance and submission.²⁹

In God's Image

"When I first came to the job I was told repeatedly by women that there are 'other women' I want you to meet." This was a reminder that the Anglican Church Women (ACW) and the Women's Unit did not represent all Anglican women. To make room for women not involved in traditional groups, the unit held a joint conference with the ACW and these "other women," called *In God's Image*, held in May 1982, at the University of Winnipeg. Marjorie Powles was among the women attending from across Canada, as well as guests from Sri Lanka, India, Lesotho, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Sr. Marie Assad of the World Council of Churches. The program offered sociological as well as theological presentations in its plenary sessions and small group work. The Rev. Suzanne Hiatt, professor of pastoral theology at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was the keynote speaker, and she set the context in which women have lived their Christian faith, beginning with the two accounts of creation in Genesis. Hiatt attributed the secondary position of women in Christianity to the influence of culture upon the structure and tradition of

the church. The set tasks of women were: 1) recovering the record of women's achievement in the church and passing it on to their daughters; 2) insisting that the Gospel belongs to women as equals of men and not to women through men; 3) recognizing that the majority of victims in the world are women, and the church must not use culture as an excuse to condone forms of male supremacy that excuse wife beating, polygamy, and other practices that suggest women are to be controlled by men; 4) the ordination of women is important in part because it signifies women in the public sphere and that women have a lot to say about issues, but "we haven't been socialized to make pronouncements or to think of ourselves as public persons;" and 5) "as women join the public sphere, we need to make clear – we want to change the structures."

Kathleen Storrie of the faculty of sociology of the University of Saskatchewan reminded participants that, ever since Aristotle defined a female as "a misbegotten male," the view of women as "other" has persisted. A male perspective unconsciously influences what is taken to be "normal" or "neutral" or scientific. Being "othered," meaning experiences such as wife battering and the reality that 60 percent of homicide victims are women killed by a man in "the family context," illustrates the ways in which women's experience is downplayed by society.³⁰

General Synod and Sexual Misconduct

Jeanne Rowles retired from Church House in 1989, three years before the General Synod disbanded the Women's Unit. Her contributions would no doubt have influenced the sexual misconduct policy that the General Synod began to develop for its staff and volunteers in 1992.³¹ Because of the relative independence and authority of each bishop and diocese in Canada, this policy was intended only for national office functions and its ministries. Unlike churches elsewhere in the Anglican Communion, the thirty dioceses of the Canadian church each have responsibility for their own policies, and there is no accountability to a single national standard, code of ethics, or authority. An individual who has experienced sexual harm in one diocese must use the policy and procedures of that diocese to make a complaint of misconduct. This means a ministry leader allegedly responsible for that harm can be relocated to another diocese, confusing the process of accountability and complaint. It further means that the church cannot hold an ordained Anglican priest accountable for abuse of children or any person unless that priest is serving

in a ministry of the diocese in which the allegations have taken place and can be held responsible by the legal understanding of “duty of care.” This was determined by a decision of the Ontario Supreme Court in a case against Grenville Christian College and the Diocese of Ontario.³² Ordination as a priest in the Anglican Church of Canada does not require that priests subscribe to a code of ethics regarding professional conduct. This lack of structure places an undue burden on the victim in seeking justice and healing, protecting the alleged offender and the church. Church House, functioning in an advisory capacity to the thirty dioceses in Canada, does not establish binding policies, practices, and protocols regarding sexual abuse and misconduct. For example, in 1988, the Children’s Unit produced *A Citizen’s Guide to Sexual Abuse Issues*.³³ This booklet was to provide sound basic information on sexual abuse in the hope that the reader would be led to further study and, more importantly, to action. Researched and written by a former Children’s Unit staff member, the booklet details facts and myths about child sexual abuse, emphasizing significant information such as: 1) one in four girls and one in six boys will have received some unwanted sexual attention before age eighteen; 2) sexual abuse is one of the most underreported crimes in society; and 3) families and friends tend to desert victims when they disclose abuse.³⁴ What this booklet does not reference is sexual abuse as an issue within the church itself; nor does it set out model policies and protocols for reporting and preventing abuse in the church. Keeping the focus on children, in 1992 the General Synod referred a resolution on the “Sexual Molestation and Abuse of Children” to the National Executive Committee with a request that the Program Committee “produce a comprehensive protocol for responding to reports of sexual molestation and abuse of young persons by some personnel, and that this protocol be circulated to all dioceses.”³⁵

The church was no doubt influenced by Canada’s ratification of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child in 1991, as well as the *Badgley Report on Child Sexual Abuse in Canada* of 1984³⁶ and the Winter Commission Report on the sexual abuse of boys in Newfoundland by parish priests, released in 1990.³⁷ More pressing for Anglicans was the disclosure in 1990 of the sexual offences against children by John Gallienne, choirmaster of Kingston’s St. George’s Cathedral.³⁸ As Jeanne Rowles remarked in 2007, with respect to John Gallienne and other ministry leaders alleged to be in abusive ministry relationships “Is there no way to keep track of these guys?” Jeanne then summarized her insights,

born of experience, stating that sexual misconduct is a women's issue, and the concerns of women are invisible to the church.³⁹

Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women

In 1988, as Jeanne Rowles was winding down her service with the Anglicans of Canada, the World Council of Churches (WCC) launched the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women to provide a framework within which WCC member churches could look at their structures, teaching, and practices with a commitment to the full participation of women. It was also seen as an opportunity for churches to reflect on women's lives in society and to stand in "courageous solidarity" with women. Midway into the decade, the WCC began to gather responses to the decade's initiatives through team visits to churches, national councils, and some 650 women's groups. The reported findings described "The Stones" of violence and racism against women, economic injustice, barriers to participation, the role of family, oppressive theology and interpretations of the Bible, attitudes to sexuality, and both solidarity and divisions between women. In particular, the teams noted that, "to deal with the violence women experience even within the church is to approach two areas: sexuality and abuse of power which have always been taboo for the churches." "Most discouraging was clear evidence that women are marginalized by their own church structures . . . All the teams noted women's lack of or limited access to decision-making processes – and thus power in their churches . . . This situation both reflects and promotes a similar imbalance of power in society." When the decade closed, WCC saw its agenda as unfinished, and called for "sometimes radical reordering of aspects of the life of the church rooted in a reinterpretation and reconstruction of those practices and teachings that discriminate against women." This report is replete with evidence of the challenges women face within their churches.⁴⁰

In Closing

Just before Jeanne left Church House, Marc Lepine shot and killed fourteen women students at L'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal on 6 December 1989. This event galvanized all of Canada, and twenty-six years later is still solemnly marked with services on campuses and in churches across the country. The Primate's office asked Rowles what to say. "He

wanted me to say it was violence that could happen to anyone. He did not understand it happened because they were women. Good guys did not think this had anything to do with women.”⁴¹

Jeanne Rowles concluded her 2007 interview with an acute feminist critique: “When we want what men have got, it is not good news.” The church is not behaving differently because of the ordination of women, although some individuals within it are changing. “Some women in the pews have different visions of what could be.” She reflected that lay-women could, and can, make changes ordained women cannot make if they are to stay employed. There were no ordained women in the Women’s Unit. “No one could pull strings or control us.” “When it comes to making changes, it is people on the outside that make a difference.”⁴²

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