

Confronting Sexual Abuse in Anglican Canada: Second Wave Feminists

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“History takes shape in the person before me” (Michael Eric Dyson)¹

This is a story of feminists in Canada’s Anglican community who responded to sexual misconduct in their church. It is told through the personal histories of women whom I met while I was enrolled in divinity studies at Trinity College, in the Toronto School of Theology of the University of Toronto in the 1980s, and in my ministry over the following twenty-five years. The above quote from Michael Eric Dyson describes my historical perspective. Their stories, within the larger narrative of disclosures of sexual abuses of children and women in ministry relationships, reveal how the cultures of ecclesial silence and sexism began to be broken by the persistence of feminists challenging and changing the faith community in which they worshiped and served. From institutional margins they identified and addressed church leadership on sexual misconduct in ministry relationships to ensure justice for victims, holding the church accountable for its clergy, leaders, and volunteers. Telling the stories of feminists who confronted sexual violence helps keep the focus on the contributions of women transforming the culture around them and acknowledges their contributions to the continuing struggles of women decades later seeking freedom from harassment, sexism, and misogyny that continue to confront us. Ned Franks, whose son was a victim of the choirmaster of Kingston’s cathedral, observed that confronting sexual violence is “the great gift of the women’s movement to us all.”² In writing

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of the women who confronted the culture in which I studied and ministered, I am acknowledging deep thanks for their gifts of critical analysis, voice, language, advocacy, support, collaboration, and policies that are contributing to transformational changes in the church. I chose to write this history through their reflections and recollections as recorded in personal interviews in 2007.

In 2017 Constance Buchanan summarized reasons for studying women in religion, beginning with learning how women understood themselves, their social context, and their world.³ Interviewing each woman in my study gave me an opportunity to learn how the women's movement, as well as relationships with those in her faith community, arose in the social context of second wave feminism, which then led to confronting sexual misconduct as an issue for the church in the communities it serves and within its own ministries.

In 2016 I presented the contributions of Marjorie Powles and Jeanne Rowles, who confronted sexism and misogyny in Anglican Canada with feminist perspectives informed by the Social Gospel. Their stories illustrated how religion and religious institutions have historically been a major sphere of women's activities. Powles was deeply involved with the Student Christian Movement in university and in her later professional life as one of its leaders. This was followed by twenty years in Japan with her husband, an Anglican priest and educator. Rowles was raised and educated in the Saskatchewan of Tommy Douglas. Her volunteer and professional life was with the YWCA in Canada and overseas in Tanzania and Pakistan. Both women returned to Canada as the women's movement was emerging in the 1970s and met in the Movement for Christian Feminism. I brought their stories to the Canadian Society of Church History in 2016.⁴ Status of Women in Canada funded grassroots feminist activities across the country in the 1980s, including those in faith-based institutions that addressed violence against women. With this empowerment of women, disclosures of sexual abuse in Canadian religious institutions began to emerge. Bonds among women in Toronto's mainline faith communities led to collaborations such as that of Powles and Rowles who then merged their feminist perspectives and experience with those of second wave feminists Donna Hunter and Mary Wells in the Anglican Diocese of Toronto. This collaboration in the world of churches reflects the findings of Laura Weldon, illustrating how the women's movement was more influential on policy development in Canada in the 1980s than the number of social minorities (women) in governance.⁵ These were lay women

outside designated leadership roles and, as such, corroborated what Jeanne Rowles observed, that changing the church is the work of those outside its hierarchical structures.⁶

Donna Hunter and Mary Wells were instrumental in developing and implementing the sexual misconduct policy of the Diocese of Toronto in 1991-92. Hunter was then Director of Programme Resources for the diocese, charged with overseeing a task force to respond to sexual misconduct in the diocese. Mary Wells, a social worker, and author of *Canada's Law on Sexual Abuse of Children*,⁷ volunteered her services to the task force. Wells, a cradle Catholic, began worshiping with Anglicans while responding to child sexual abuse in her social work practice.

Confronting Sexual Abuse: Canada in the 1980s

There were several public disclosures and findings in Canada that brought the sexual abuse of children and women, violence against women, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination to the attention of Canadians in this decade. Investigative commissions and media reporting revealed the extent to which these tragic realities were part of Canada's social fabric. Canadians, especially those who had experienced sexual abuse as children or in relationships with clergy, teachers, coaches, or community volunteers, also learned the limits of Canada's legal, justice, social service agencies, professions, and churches to respond to them. According to Linda Gordon's study of the history and politics of family, women's movements have consistently been concerned with violence not only against women, but also against children. This concern grew when feminism was strong and ebbed when feminism was weak.⁸ Feminism had been influencing social, political, economic, and cultural life in Canada since the 1960s, as has been well documented in social histories as well as federal commissions, reports, and programs that led to, and followed, the establishment of the Status of Women Canada in 1971.

In 1980 the Federal Committee to Study Sexual Offenses Against Children and Youth was formed. It issued its findings, known as the Badgley Report, with the stunning facts that one out of three adult males and one of two adult females in Canada had experienced at least one unwanted sexual act; four out of five of these unwanted acts occurred in childhood.⁹ In 1986, when Jeanne Rowles was responsible for the Women's Unit of the Anglican Church of Canada, the General Synod received a report from that unit on *Violence Against Women, Abuse in*

*Society, and Proposals for Change.*¹⁰ In 1986 Trinity College's Faculty of Divinity nodded to the increasing influence of women in the church, ten years after the ordination of women, by appointing Marsha Hewitt as Professor of Social Ethics and Peggy Day as Professor of Old Testament Studies. Kate Merriman, a Trinity graduate and priest, ordained in the Yukon, joined Trinity as its first woman chaplain that same year.

In 1988 Bill C-15, Reforms to the Criminal Code of Canada were made regarding sexual abuse and the testimony of children.¹¹ In 1988 the World Council of Churches declared an Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. Then disclosures of sexual abuse at Mount Cashel hit the press on Easter Sunday 1989, generating critical concern about the extent of sexual abuse in Canadian religious institutions.¹² That May, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of St. John's appointed a commission to conduct hearings surrounding sexual abuse at Mount Cashel headed by the former Lieutenant Governor of Newfoundland and Labrador, an Anglican named Gordon A. Winter. The Winter Report, as it is commonly known, was submitted in 1990.¹³ This was followed by the Hughes Inquiry into Mount Cashel that began public hearings in September 1989.¹⁴ As Judy Steed notes in *Our Little Secret*, "The Hughes Inquiry crashed through our collective denial." According to Steed, for the first time in Canadian history, a group of adult victims of child sexual abuse were publicly identified as they told their story on television.¹⁵

That December a lone gunman, a disgruntled former student, murdered fourteen women, engineering students at L'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal, because they were women. The observance of this day continues on campuses across Canada and in memorial services organized by the Women's Inter-Church Council of Canada (WICC).

In the United States, Marie Fortune, a United Church of Christ Minister in Seattle, Washington, began training local clergy to respond to sexual violence and domestic violence in 1977. In 1979 the USA Department of Justice asked Fortune to develop a pilot project in rural communities addressing domestic violence, using the churches as the base of organization. Training in five areas of the USA and Canada then began. Fortune's first book, *Sexual Violence, the Unmentionable Sin*, was published in 1980.¹⁶ Churchwomen in Canada began to pay attention to Fortune's workshops and to read her books.

Although this period in Canadian Anglican history coincides with women entering ordained ministry, according to Wendy Fletcher, in the first decade following the ordination of women, most Anglican clergy

women did not self-identify as feminists, but rather emulated the roles modeled by their male forebears and mentors.¹⁷ Fletcher's findings allow one to see that the ordination of women, in and of itself, is not a measure of the church engaging issues relevant to women and children or advocating transformative actions arising from feminism, again reflecting the findings of Weldon.¹⁸

Meeting Donna Hunter

Donna Hunter came to work for the Diocese of Toronto in November 1988 following eight years as Director of the Women's Interchurch Council of Canada. While she served with WICC, the Council developed *Hands to End Violence against Women*, a curriculum for theological colleges.¹⁹ This publication was made possible with federal funding through Status of Women Canada, funding no longer available due to shifting government priorities on advocacy for women by 2007. Although Hunter claimed copies were sent to every theological college in Canada, I was not aware of this resource during my years at Trinity and the Toronto School of Theology from 1985 to 1988.

Prior to joining WICC in 1980, Hunter worked with the YWCA on a program for women in poverty, beginning in 1977, after she completed her degree in Sociology from York University. Hunter was the first in her family to earn a university degree and did so by studying part time for ten years while parenting four young children. Her early years at York closely followed the evolution of the women's movement in North America in the 1970s. Hunter recalled having read Betty Friedan and described herself at that time as one of the women with "a problem that had no name."²⁰ Hunter also spoke of being influenced by the National Film Board Studio D productions that critiqued the ways women were portrayed in advertising and the media.²¹

While Director of the Women's Interchurch Council of Canada, Hunter was introduced to the work of Marie Fortune, and became an international adviser to the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence based in Seattle, now known as the FaithTrust Institute.²² Fortune not only wrote and preached about sexual violence; she also developed workshops and teaching programs to help congregations and seminaries name, define, and respond to sexual misconduct with justice for its victims. Outstanding among these was *Not in My Church*.²³ Hunter was impressed by the analysis of power that Fortune brought to

sexual and domestic violence and abuse. Hunter recalled attending a Fortune workshop at the Centre for Christian Studies (CCS), the ecumenical educational program for lay ministry, affiliated with the Toronto School of Theology at that time.²⁴ According to Hunter, in the 1980s a majority of CCS students were women, and among them there was an awareness of clergy sexual misconduct. This gender demographic is not surprising, as the Centre was formed as a merger of the United Church and Anglican Church Training Centres for Women.²⁵

As the first woman to work for the Toronto diocese in a professional capacity when she joined the Programme Resources staff, Hunter noted she prepared herself for this singular role by personally determining this as her last professional position so that if it did not work out she need not include the diocese as an employer on her resume! Hunter observed that women might be visibly present on committees or boards of the diocese, but their voices were not heard. Ordaining women may have reflected some measure of equality for women, but, for Hunter, it did not recognize talented, educated, committed women who sought to teach or lead but who did not see themselves as clergy. To ensure using her voice effectively Hunter attended professional development workshops in the USA that “pushed women to look at their own behavior in getting heard in male dominated organizations.”²⁶ When I asked Hunter how she maintained her leadership and direction during this period, she replied that she considered the women for whom she spoke and the gatherings of women in the church to whom she listened; with them behind her she felt empowered “to do things I would never have done.” “Without them, I would have remained quiet.” She noted that before any change can happen there needed to be a critical mass of persons with interest in the issue.²⁷

The disclosures of sexual abuse at Mount Cashel occurred six months after Hunter came to the Diocese of Toronto. A Toronto parish priest responded to the Mount Cashel news by contacting Terence Finlay, newly installed as the tenth Bishop of Toronto. Finlay determined that a sexual abuse task force be formed to address possible allegations of sexual abuse in the diocese.²⁸ Donna Hunter was the diocesan staff person responsible for this initiative. This group included a forensic psychiatrist, two male and two female clergy, one of four suffragan bishops of the diocese, and Mary Wells. The task force struggled with the issue of sexual misconduct and confidentiality of confession, suggesting clergy could have been protecting their own interests.²⁹ Hunter reflected that collegiality with Mary Wells kept her from feeling alienated within the dynamics

of the task force; she relied on Wells to keep a focus on policy development and avoid pitfalls that would hinder its effectiveness. Wells, by then, had written the handbook on Canada's laws regarding the sexual abuse of children; she firmly grasped policy issues.

In 1991 Hunter was appointed Director of Programme Resources. Hunter's "critical mass" grew that year with the formation of the Bishop's Committee on the Sexual Harassment of Women Clergy chaired by Marjorie Powles. Committee members included Alice Medcof, Marsha Hewitt of Trinity's Divinity Faculty, and Mary Wells.³⁰ Ironically, Hunter's appointment as Director of Programme Resources occurred when the former director was appointed Dean of Divinity at Trinity, a vacancy that occurred when a University of Toronto Grievance Review Panel ruled in favour of Professor Marsha Hewitt who filed a grievance against Trinity and the dean regarding the terms of her 1986 appointment to the divinity faculty.

In 1994 the Anglican Diocese of Toronto and Bishop Finlay recognized Donna Hunter's outstanding leadership and contributions to the church and to women by installing her as a Lay Canon of the Diocese.

Mary Wells and Anglicans

Mary Wells has been specializing in child protection and sexual abuse in families and in churches and religious communities in metropolitan Toronto for more than forty years. In the 1970s she served with the Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto, and in the 1980s she helped launch Justice for Children and Youth, a non-profit legal aid and advocacy program serving eligible children and families in the Toronto area.³¹ At Justice for Children and Youth she developed innovative methods to prepare and support child witnesses for legal proceedings. In 1981 Wells was the first director of the Crisis Intervention Program of the Metro Toronto Special Committee on Child Abuse, where she introduced a model of rapid response to sexually abused children and offered training for police officers and child protection workers on investigating child sexual abuse cases. At the time of our interview in 2007, Wells was Executive Director for Catholic Family Services of Durham, Ontario, in suburban Toronto.

Wells, born and raised Roman Catholic, began to worship with a Toronto Anglican parish when working with the Institute for the Prevention of Child Abuse during the 1980s, when the Catholic church was

involved in controversies surrounding disclosures of child sexual abuse. At the Institute she trained attorneys and agencies responding to child abuse and developed child protection protocols. Her first experience training clergy on responses to allegations of child sexual abuse was with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Alexandria Cornwall in eastern Ontario during investigations of child abuse in Cornwall that lasted more than twenty years.³² In the decade following her work on the Diocese of Toronto's Sexual Misconduct Policy, Wells continued her consultation responsibilities on behalf of abused children, including services and support for Tikinigan Child and Family Services in Northern Ontario. There, she prepared the first complainants to testify against Ralph Rowe, an Anglican priest who in May 2017 became the subject of a multi-million dollar class action suit against Scouts Canada, the Anglican Church, and the Diocese of Keewatin for sexual abuse of children.³³

Wells' Irish Catholic family in Toronto included numerous priests and nuns. She attended Catholic schools where she recalls the wisdom of a grade twelve teaching sister who told her "God gave you a brain and I guess He meant you to use it." This was when Mary, then in grade twelve, asked if she might read Teilhard de Chardin's *The Divine Milieu*, then on the Vatican's index of forbidden books.³⁴ "Read it and see what you think," was the sister's reply. This encouraged Mary to consider, analyze, evaluate, discern, and use her own good brain, guided by a belief that God intended her to do so. This critical thinking had barely begun when the grade-twelve class was given "the sex talk" by an embittered old priest. "It is hard to believe today, but we Catholic girls, ages 16 and 17 mostly did not have a clue about the mechanics of intercourse." The "sex talk" started with the priest pulling down a wall chart depicting a hermaphrodite. "I guess he thought he could cover off male and female genitalia in one fell swoop. It went downhill from there; pubic hair meant 'keep out.' If you got wet it was a venial sin, if you let a boy touch you it was a mortal sin!" We walked out of the talk stunned and horrified. "But then I got to thinking; if God made sex, and God is good, then sex is meant to be a good thing."³⁵

Thank God I had this foundation when I started to get referrals to counsel sexually abused children as a young social worker in the early '80s. At the time this was an utterly new field with very few guidelines, so I used what skills and knowledge I had as a children's therapist. I had two basic premises: 1) the children had to be helped, and 2) they needed a therapist who was comfortable with sex and

sexuality. The goals of the therapy were helping children overcome their shock from the abusive behaviour inflicted on them, to help them to believe it was not their fault, and to hold out a hope for them that they would grow up to enjoy happy, normal relationships. If I did not believe that God created sex to be a good thing, I couldn't have done this.

God made sex to be a good thing, but like all gifts it can be abused. The idiotic sex talk by the priest, also led me to consider the hierarchical structures of the Roman Church. I came to a point where I could no longer be affiliated with the misogyny, nor could I raise my son in such an oppressive atmosphere. So I left and began to attend the Anglican Church in my mid thirties and am still there today. No church is perfect of course, but I think I am very comfortable with the way the Anglican Communion has struggled with issues of abuse and generally attempts to do the right thing.³⁶

When Mary Wells volunteered her professional services to the task force to develop a sexual misconduct policy and protocol for the Diocese of Toronto, she brought the structure of the legal system to the group, as well as an understanding of the culture of church authority, canon law, and theology. Like Hunter, Wells understood that working with sexual abuse was working with issues of power, especially power of the abuser. Due to her familiarity with law, she was able to focus on the criminal justice system as a means of offsetting the power of an abuser. And her understanding of canon law enabled her to direct the task group to canon law as a means of rooting the policy in the church's legal tradition. But as a social worker and therapist she also brought the fruits of feminist practice perspective on sexual abuse, generated by American therapists such as Alice Miller, Sandra Butler, and Judith Lewis Herman, that broke through the silence surrounding sexual abuse and enabled the ability to respond to it.³⁷

As Wells worked with Hunter and the task group, she saw that the developing policy was in the forefront of those she had seen in North America as it included misconduct in adult relationships as well as sexual abuse of children. In her subsequent ten years working with the diocese she trained both clergy and laypersons to take ownership of the problem of sexual misconduct within the church community. Her support was invaluable to me in 1992 when a female priest and colleague filed a complaint of sexual misconduct against my ordination mentor, then a

regional dean. Close to a decade later Wells assisted my work with the parish in which I then served as we learned my immediate predecessor in the parish had been charged with sexual abuse in the course of his ministry in another diocese.

During that decade Wells also assisted the Anglican Primate of Canada to respond to parishioners of St. George's Cathedral in Kingston, Ontario, where John Gallienne had served as choirmaster.³⁸ There had been no care for this congregation for two years following disclosures of Gallienne's abuse of choristers. Judy Steed covered the Gallienne story for the *Toronto Star* and in her book, *Our Little Secret*.³⁹

Silence, Sex, and Episcopacy

Wells views episcopal power as critical to dealing with the whole issue of sexual abuse, beginning with a need to remove "silencing mechanisms" that fail to disclose sexual abuse complaints, as well as failing to speak about sexuality and sexual abuse. For Wells, speaking about sexuality and sexual abuse is redemptive work in which we claim the courage to advocate on behalf of others, whereas "proscribing sex lives is the most powerful thing a church can do; it is how a church keeps its power."⁴⁰ Wells sees churches in general not grappling with basic understandings of human sexuality and sexual development, including differences between male and female sexuality, and sexual orientation across a broad spectrum. For her, the debates about sexual orientation that have preoccupied Anglicans for more than three decades are closely linked with sexual misconduct and the role of women.⁴¹ They are about church leaders keeping their power. Male sexual orientation has dominated these debates. Her insights and observations are named and corroborated in literature by gay Anglican and Roman Catholic clergy describing "an ecclesial field of silence" – a term used by Mark Jordan in his work *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism*.⁴² Jay Emerson Johnson, an Episcopal priest and program director for the school of Gay and Lesbian Studies of the Pacific School of Religion, notes "we know that our own Anglican structures and ecclesial patterns can, have and still do exhibit many of the same dynamics Jordan identifies."⁴³

Wells is aware that it was very helpful to come from outside the Anglican community, as she did not know the "rules of being deferential" among members of the diocesan sexual abuse task group. She therefore could raise issues and ask questions critical to that group. These issues

otherwise might have been swept into the great silence surrounding abuse and deference to clerical authority.⁴⁴

Mary Wells continues her work through contributions to the Anglican Communion Safe Church Network, an international body inaugurated in 2008 at Lambeth.⁴⁵ Twenty years after the Diocese of Toronto adopted the sexual misconduct policy developed by Hunter and Wells, Mary Wells was with global members of the Anglican Communion in their 2011 conference, *Partnering for Prevention*, held in Canada at the University of Victoria, supported by the Diocese of British Columbia and the Anglican Foundation of Canada. Her private practice as a consultant and trainer in the area of child sexual abuse across North America has included extensive work for numerous religious congregations and communities including the Canadian Jesuits, the Anglican Church of Canada, and most recently the Anglican Communion Safe Church Commission to which the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed her as Anglican Canada's Safe Church Commissioner in 2017.

Constance Buchanan's observations of the interplay of religious systems of meaning and belief and the cultural patterns that shape personal stories and give meaning to their lives are illuminated in the narratives of both Donna Hunter and Mary Wells.⁴⁶ They informed the manner in which both women held their ministry to women and to the church when professionally engaged in policy development in the 1980s and 1990s, and again as they reflected on their committed careers two decades later. As institutional outsiders, Hunter and Wells confronted sexual abuse and the cultural dynamics of power, sexism, secrecy, and silencing mechanisms in their Anglican community. Empowered by faith and feminism, they moved a church closer to social and gender justice.

In writing their stories I became engaged in recording events shedding light on legacies that many Anglicans would rather remain unseen. Grace Paley, an American poet, in a radio interview 1985, observed that when you write you illuminate what is hidden, and that is a political act.⁴⁷ Feminism, even in church, is political, as is the writing of it.

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