As a leadership consultant, I’ve helped many women find and own their voices. Yet, for a long time, I didn’t recognize my own power to help women speak up about abuse and harassment in the church. Over the course of forty years of ministry in multiple states, I’ve been on the receiving end of unwanted sexual advances in church. I’ve also been in a position of leadership and failed to respond adequately to reports of abuse or advocate for those who were harmed.

But we can do better than this. Those of us with power have a responsibility to ensure that power is shared, not hoarded. And when power is abused, it’s up to us to make sure victims are heard and protected.

Activist Hannah Paasch started the #ChurchToo hashtag after learning of Tarana Burke’s #MeToo movement. Paasch courageously shared her own story of rape, and the silencing and shaming she experienced in the evangelical church. She then invited others to share their stories of sexual abuse and harassment in the church.

In reading these stories, it’s clear that there’s a power paradox in the church. God gave the church the power to do a lot of great things—to make positive change—for the good of all people. But instead of allowing power to flow freely among believers for the benefit of all, as it should, many churches funnel power into the hands of a few people or a single group. Often, those people or that group use that power to control and withhold power from others. And unfortunately, this controlling power is usually gendered, leaving women as victims of or silent colluders with powerful men.

What is power? Simply put, it’s the ability to get things done, or to influence or persuade others. There are many different ways to gain and use power. Those with formal positions or ranks in the church have power (e.g. senior pastor, youth pastor). Those with informal positions in the church exercise power (e.g. opinion leader, member of founding family). Church leaders with interpersonal power amass influence (e.g., due to their teaching ability or charisma or due to their religious “brand,” perceived spirituality, or social media footprint). We all have power, but some of us have more than others.

According to the Pew Research Center, women comprise 55% of Evangelical Protestant churches, 59% of Historically Black Protestant churches, 55% of Mainline Protestant churches and 44% of Orthodox churches. Women hold far less than half of the structural power in all of these traditions; men have dominated leadership positions in each of these denominations for decades or more. But instead of
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sharing their power or using it to positively influence the world, some men use power for their own ends or to control and restrict others. Sexual harassment and violence are an abuse of power and they’re symptoms of this gendered power imbalance in the church.

The way we use our power shouldn’t place other believers at risk. Power belongs to all in the body, not just a select few or a single group. We need to take practical steps to rebalance power in our churches and make them safer for those among us who, as of now, have less structural power and are more vulnerable to abuse.

Church leaders can use the structural power they already have to develop, implement, and enforce policies that prevent harassment and abuse; protect congregants from abusers; and provide care and justice for victims of abuse and harassment. I invite all church leaders to seek additional legal and professional guidance on how to create safe places for women and men in your church. Here are seven initial suggestions to consider.

1. Repent

I was serving as a youth leader when a teen girl from outside our ministry accused one of my teen boys of inappropriate sexual conduct. My first inclination was to protect the young man in my charge, not to truly hear the young woman. Twenty-five years ago, many churches, including mine at the time, had no policies or guidelines on how to handle such cases. I was on my own. To this day, I do not know what happened. I never got the full story, but I still vouched for the accused young man with law enforcement. None of us heard this young woman. For that, I am deeply sorry.

Over the years, I’ve witnessed many churches handle reports of sexual abuse with an embarrassingly informal and cavalier attitude. The church should be a space of refuge, care, and transformation for victims. But for far too many girls, it’s a battlefield where injuries and trauma go unnoticed and untreated.

I urge churches to repent of a clear preference for protecting our sons over hearing and empowering our daughters. We must repent of incomplete policies and overlooked trauma.

2. Form Partnerships

Some churches are affiliated with denominations that already have comprehensive sexual misconduct policies and denominational resources on abuse. But sadly, most churches today still aren’t equipped to handle harassment and abuse. Church leaders should establish partnerships with trained advocates who can help guide congregants through the process of finding safety after abuse and navigating the legal system. Resources available in each region or country will differ, but for US readers, here are some agencies and professionals that can help:

- RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)
- National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)
- Behavioral Health Departments of Hospitals
- Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
- Some YWCA’s offer support for sexual abuse

Make brochures/pamphlets with contact information for counselors and social services available to your congregation. These services should be provided for women, men, and children who have suffered abuse. Now is the time to seek these partnerships and clarify church abuse policies (next on our list), not after a violation has occurred.

3. Establish Policies and Procedures

Take a good look at your church operational policies. Do you have an explicit statement that defines sexual harassment and abuse? Does it outline
the consequences for violating the policy? If you answered no to either of those questions, it’s time to establish a policy and put guidelines in place for accountability and enforcement. All paid and volunteer leaders should be informed of the policy.

Additionally, leaders need to establish protocols for reporting and investigating abuse. As we’ve seen in recent cases of high-profile leaders accused of abuse or misconduct, leaders hold power over and with staff, elder boards, and even personnel boards. Unless the church is large enough to have a separate human resources department, those conducting the investigation often have long-term relationships with alleged offenders. Those relationships will likely jeopardize their neutrality.

Many churches now mandate background checks of all staff and volunteers who serve in youth ministry. In the age of #ChurchToo, we should probably consider conducting background checks of all volunteers and leaders.

4. Mandate Sexual Harassment and Boundaries training.

For my first formal corporate consulting assignment in the late 1990s, I was asked to develop a sexual harassment training program for a client. The training consisted of defining sexual harassment and providing scenarios that depicted various forms of sexual harassment. That was almost thirty years ago. The need for such training hasn’t changed, but too often leaders in churches have overlooked the need for it.

Years later when I was in seminary, students were required to attend a workshop on boundaries. It provided clear guidelines on the boundaries clergy should maintain to avoid impropriety and for the safety of congregants. These types of training are needed for all leaders and volunteers for the same reasons: to educate, inform, and protect against abuse.

5. Establish “Safe” Reporting Protocols

When conducting leadership training for churches, I sometimes hear volunteers complain that they don’t want their church to become too “corporate.” But this is one area where you can never get too “corporate.” Congregants and staff must have a safe and confidential place to report sexual abuse and harassment in the church. Those reports need to be turned over to an objective and neutral investigating team that likewise maintains the confidentiality of the reporter. For churches that do not have a formal human resources department, leaders must seek professional services outside of the church. This might mean partnering with larger churches or seeking references from local attorneys who provide support and guidance to churches.

6. Provide Counseling and Care

Church is supposed to be a place of healing and hope. Congregants and staff who have been violated in church or by church leaders often experience deep hurt and dissonance. In some cases, such hurt can lead to a crisis of faith. It can also cause a person to question her identity, voice, and worth. Many of these individuals would benefit from counseling and care that acknowledges these deep, layered wounds. If a church doesn’t have a licensed counselor on staff, it should develop partnerships with Christian clinicians to whom church leaders can refer victims. Again, now is the time to seek these partnerships, not after a violation has occurred.

Furthermore, members who have experienced harassment, rape, or other forms of sexual violence outside of the church, should be able to come to the church for healing. We must hear their stories and walk through the healing process with them—without imposing another layer of shame or silencing.

7. Continue Educating Leaders on Gender and Power

Both men and women can be harassed and abused. But poor theology and bad leadership practices often specifically endanger and hurt women. According to Peter Scazzero in The Emotionally Healthy Leader, “Navigating the issue of power is a true test of both character and leadership” (p. 239). Likewise, navigating the issues of gender and power will be a true test of the church’s character and leadership. Specifically, will churches work to create safe places...
of worship and work for all? Will they equally value the experiences and voices of women?

Every church leader who desires to create safe place and lead in the age of #ChurchToo should do the following:

- Read through the entries of #ChurchToo on Twitter. Identify with the voices of those who have been abused, harassed and pained.
- Conduct your own “power inventory” to identify the types of power you hold.2
- Pay attention to whose voices get heard in your congregation and whose are overlooked.
- Take a class or workshop on sexual violence and seek to understand how violence affects your congregation.
- Form an educational groups of church leaders to unravel the myths and stereotypes about gender that run rampant in our churches.

For too long, church leaders have been silent on the sexual harassment and sexual violence that occurs in the church. If we’ve kept quiet in the past out of naiveté, ignorance, or woeful neglect of process, we are now without excuse. In the age of #ChurchToo, church leaders have a responsibility to address the gendered power imbalance that gave birth to and mandated this redemption movement. May we work to make the church a space of healing, transformation, and empowerment for all.

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