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How to apologize for abuse



"Sexual violence, like any abuse of power, only stops when we expose it and commit to effective prevention and response practices," says the author. Photo: LeviQ/Shutterstock

By Marion Little (<https://anglicanjournal.com/author/marion-little/>) on July 23, 2015



Christ fundamentally restructures power systems. In the Beatitudes and in every parable, sermon and directive, he insists that the needs of the most vulnerable be tended first, informing how we organize and prioritize the use of resources. They also ensure full apology, restitution and healing when abuse happens. Unconditional compassion and unflinching accountability are Christ's hallmarks and, not incidentally, the underpinnings of abuse prevention.

In 1994, Gordon Nakayama admitted to sexually abusing boys during 62 years as an Anglican priest (1932-1994). He died in 1995. Church officials neglected to report his abuse to police.

His adult children, Joy Kogawa and the Rev. Canon (ret.) Timothy Nakayama, have shown great fortitude in publicly acknowledging their father's violence, extending solidarity towards survivors, and offering to participate in reconciliation.



This year, two pro-active Anglican bishops publicly disclosed Gordon Nakayama's history of harm and, on June 15, issued an apology (<https://anglicanjournal.com/articles/bishops-apologize-for-japanese-canadian-priest-s-abuse>) to the Japanese-Canadian Anglican communities where he preyed.

Commendably, this was built on an 18-month consultation with the Reverend Nakayama Disclosure Working Group. The apology expresses regret for avoiding public disclosure, acknowledges "sexually immoral behaviour," commits to listening and promises pastoral care. In this, Bishop Melissa Skelton (diocese of New Westminster) and Archbishop Gregory Kerr-Wilson (diocese of Calgary) have offered a strong example of servant leadership. But, as Bishop Skelton has said, it's only a start.

The larger context

Two pivotal questions remain, however: why wasn't the abuse reported in 1994? Why didn't the apology process begin until 2014?

The Bulletin (a Japanese-Canadian journal) says survivors and human rights advocates began meeting in 2006, following years of rumour and complaint within the Japanese-Canadian community. Meanwhile, the church sat on Nakayama's admission.

During his career, Nakayama was supervised by two bishops in the diocese of New Westminster, four in Calgary and, in retirement, was simultaneously overseen by three in New Westminster while still under Calgary's authority. Nine bishops did not prioritize the needs of children, provide adequate supervision, insist on sufficient accountability or ensure complaints could be made with ease and dignity.

In 1994, church leaders were alert to Anglican sexual abuse cases (e.g., John Gallienne ?1990, William Starr?1993, Ralph Rowe ?1994 and residential school disclosures). There was wide media coverage of the 1988 Criminal Code changes regarding child sexual abuse. Canada ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, and the first diocesan sexual misconduct policy was adopted by the diocese of Toronto in 1992. We were not ignorant.

Failure to report

Apologizing for avoidance of public disclosure is important, but secondary. The primary issue is failure to follow child protection law in 1994.

Since 1965, adults have had a legal duty to report current and historical child maltreatment to Child Protection. (There is no statute of limitations on child abuse or sexual assault in Canada.) Adults who remain silent are legally, and morally, responsible for abuse that occurs following failure to report.

A police investigation while Nakayama lived would have determined the scope of predation and found survivors. The refusal to report undermines the church's ability to make amends, provide pastoral care and apologize.

The survivors of Nakayama likely range in age from their 40s to their 90s.



According to British and U.S. research, child molesters in institutional settings victimize 44 to 61 children/youth on average before being caught (increasing with time and access). They typically do not stop until caught.

Several factors suggest higher numbers in Nakayama's case: a 62-year timeline, ordained authority, minimal supervision, easy access to victims in multiple settings, confined internment camps (and his movement between them), "superstar" status among Anglican Japanese-Canadians, a regular ministry to 20 Alberta communities beyond his parish and strong cultural taboos against discussing sexual abuse or challenging authority in Japanese culture, the Anglican church and Canadian society.

According to the CBC and the documentary *Survivors Rowe*, an estimated 500 First Nations boys were abused, over 20 years, by former Anglican priest and Scout leader Ralph Rowe. He was convicted in 1994 of 39 counts of sexual abuse involving 15 boys. As of 2011, these convictions had increased to 50. Like Rowe, Nakayama also ministered to isolated families and remote communities traumatized by government policies. It's possible we need to consider a greater scope of harm.

We'll never know the actual number, but one is already too many.

The apology

A full apology is difficult. It requires courage to look at harm directly and name it; whatever we've done or left undone. It requires us to be mindful, accountable and compassionate and to listen well, express genuine regret, take action for restitution and ensure prevention.

We must accurately name Nakayama's behaviour as violent abuse of power. Euphemisms like "mistakes" or "sexual bad behaviour" or "immoral sexual behaviour" minimize the violence. These were criminal acts against children by a trusted, church-endorsed adult: it's called molestation, sexual abuse/assault/exploitation.

Neuro-psychology and trauma research identify sexual assault as one of the most psychologically damaging crimes because it is such an intimate act of violence, such a profound violation of trust, and invokes such extreme shame in victims. Sexual assault results in one of the highest rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) of any violent experience-97%. (In contrast, combat veterans show 30% PTSD rates.)

The act of apology involves empathic listening until survivors trust they've been fully heard. Those who crafted the recent apology to Nakayama survivors clearly intend to listen deeply. This will take time and won't be easy. It may necessitate finding other abuse survivors to listen to, if the survivors of Nakayama can't or won't come forward.

The focus of compassionate apology is on the needs of survivors, not our desire for forgiveness or relief from shame.

In addition to avoiding our duty to report, we owe an apology for favouring the elderly comfort of a sexual predator over those he violated, for abdicating responsibility for justice and care until now, for denying survivors a recovery process until now and for neglecting to protect children in the first place, including Nakayama's children.

Unflinching accountability includes actions of restitution and prevention meaningful to survivors.



Sexual violence, like any abuse of power, only stops when we expose it and commit to effective prevention and response practices. When we say, “We take this very seriously,” survivors want to know what we will actually do to ensure no one else suffers this way. We need to share information about safe church efforts and ask what actions would further communicate our commitment to justice, making amends and preventing harm.

Helping us make a good apology is not a survivor’s burden. Usually we wait for survivors to report abuse before taking action. In this case, the perpetrator admitted harm. Since then, we’ve had a clear responsibility for right action, whether survivors ever come forward or not.

It’s up to us, as a faith community, to continually live and communicate genuine apology (for this and other histories of harm) by giving priority to the needs of the vulnerable.

Culture shift

Based on every sexual misconduct case I’ve reviewed, and reports from the Church of England and the Australian Anglican Church, we are consistently failing and often re-traumatizing survivors, particularly at the parish level. Ignorance about sexual assault results in dismissiveness, rumour-mongering, victim-blaming, ostracizing and even harassment of survivors and/or their families. Often this destroys the victim’s trust in the church and faith in a loving God.

Strangely, in most cases, a parish community rallies around the perpetrator at the expense of survivors. We’re often more passionate about the possibility of wrongful accusation (which is less than 2-3% according to Canadian, U.S., Australian and British police data) than we are about believing and meaningfully supporting the person who has experienced life-shattering harm.

Is it any wonder survivors are reluctant to disclose and request support? We have yet to prove we can be trusted to respond with compassion and accountability when we learn of abuse.

Apology does not demand forgiveness

Genuine apology doesn’t pressure survivors to forgive and move on. The 2011 Church of England document *Responding Well* cautions: “To encourage victims to forgive, where there is no effort to act on their behalf to hold the abuser to account, is a gross form of injustice.”

We must live our full apology whether or not those harmed are ever able to forgive us.

While Bishop Skelton and Archbishop Kerr-Wilson have made an excellent start, I invite them and the House of Bishops to think more deeply on this matter, particularly its implications for those living with this harm (one in three women and one in six men) and for the life of the church. I invite all of us to do the same—we are church only in relationship to each other.

Christ unflinchingly called power to accountability, especially in relation to vulnerable community members. He prioritized the needs of the vulnerable, the victimized and the stigmatized. His commitment was immediate, responsive, compassionate, needs-based, assertively proactive and pragmatic. This is the core of living a genuine apology, and it’s the core of living Christianity.

The Church of England resource Responding Well (<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2257646/responding%20well.pdf>) (2011) offers comprehensive guidance for providing pastoral support to survivors.