Western District Mennonite Conference (WDC)
Report: Intentional Conversation

Jeanette Harder, Facilitator, Dove's Nest, 3-1-2018

[This is a redacted version. Content has been removed to protect the confidentiality of the survivors.]

Meeting preparation

Between December 21, 2017, and January 29, 2018, Jeanette met by phone with each of the survivors. During the approximate one hour phone calls, she invited them to tell her what they needed. In the process, most of them shared portions of their story and offered input into the process of talking with Bethel College Mennonite Church (BCMC) and Western District Mennonite Conference (WDC). With most of them and in response to their sharing, Jeanette offered assistance with safety planning for themselves and their families, and took some needed steps toward reporting possible abuse to minors and alerting institutions about safety concerns.

Between January 30 and February 5, Jeanette met by phone or video technology with Dawn Yoder Harms, senior pastor of BCMC, and Heidi Kreider Regier and Kathy Neufeld Dunn of WDC. Through these contacts, Jeanette informed them of some of what she'd learned through talking with the survivors, advised on immediate safety needs, provided initial thoughts on recommendations, and finalized plans for the "intentional conversation."

In collaboration with the survivors, BCMC, and WDC, Jeanette arranged the logistics and agenda for an "intentional conversation" to be held on February 25, at 2:00pm in the WDC conference room.

"Intentional Conversation"

Jeanette facilitated the "intentional conversation" on February 25, at 2:00pm in the WDC conference room, with all expected attendees, and following the planned agenda. All attendees participated constructively, with each one bringing information, experiences, and feelings to the conversation.

The conversation began with making introductions, reviewing and agreeing to conversation guidelines, and sharing some things we agreed upon. After Jeanette offered some introductory comments, we directed our attention to hearing from the survivors.

Survivors' Input

("Survivors" does not necessarily always mean that all survivors were in agreement on these statements.)

The survivors' initial and priority assertion was around "Why now?!" Coupled with this, they asked, "Why us?" They pushed back on the "pastoral" words being offered to them—preferring to be considered "consultants" into what BCMC and WDC needs to do, rather than being called "victims/survivors."

The survivors also wanted to know, "Why not before?!" They each had been in contact with BCMC 3-5 years ago (since January 2013), and to varying degrees, were dissatisfied with the responses they had received. They were and are especially concerned with the safety of children, youth, and vulnerable adults at BCMC as well as other places in the community where Dan is (or has been) involved.

[Content has been removed to protect the confidentiality of the survivors.]

The survivors have significant concerns for how Dan and Loretta will act in a retaliatory fashion toward them when BCMC (or anyone else) begins to communicate about needed limitations for purposes of safety.

Another hope the survivors expressed was for other victim/survivors to be given the opportunity to be heard and helped to be kept safe, especially at BCMC.

BCMC and WDC Responses

Dawn took the lead in responding to the "Why now?!" question by sharing her growing discomfort during her short tenure at BCMC on how the situation had been handled in the past. After being in the senior pastor position for about a year, she approached WDC to learn more about what had happened and to gain support and assistance with moving forward. She expressed sadness for how the survivors had been received by BCMC in the past, and readiness to prepare and implement guidelines at BCMC to limit Dan's (and any other offenders') ability to harm others.

Heidi shared her perspective on what had transpired at BCMC when she was pastor. She shared words of sincere lament in what was and was not done, and explained that she did not have the guidelines and training at that time to know how to respond. She also shared her concern at the time on how any actions taken by BCMC would be received or affect Dan and Loretta's family. Kathy shared similar words, and expressed her preparation and readiness to support Dawn and BCMC through this.

In the meeting, the survivors expressed their acceptance and appreciation for BCMC and WDC's responses.

Timeline reconstruction

All parties to the conversation contributed to reconstructing the timeline of what had and had not happened since January 2013, with a focus on interactions between the survivors and BCMC. Through this process, it seemed that everyone learned key things they had not previously been known.

Next steps

During the conversation, we discussed and agreed on the following "next steps."

1. BCMC should acknowledge the presence of sex offenders in their congregation and provide specific guidelines to protect the safety of children, youth, and vulnerable adults at BCMC.

2. BCMC should prepare and enforce a specific agreement with Dan to ensure that children, youth, and vulnerable adults are kept safe.

3. Given the survivors' significant concern about Dan and Loretta's actions toward them when BCMC prepares and enforces the above stated guidelines and agreement, we discussed three things:
   a. Frame the changed guidelines and agreement as a result of a new policy from WDC or Mennonite Church USA.
   b. [Content has been removed to protect the confidentiality of the survivors.]
   c. Focus the new guidelines on all offenders, not just Dan.

4. Given the time it may take to prepare the above-listed guidelines and agreement, the survivors wish for Dan to be accompanied by an adult, other than Loretta, whenever engaged in any church activities.

5. While we agreed it is not the survivors' responsibility to keep children, youth, or vulnerable adults safe at BCMC, we also acknowledged that any actions taken by BCMC will likely impact the survivors, primarily as Dan and Loretta reach out to them or lash out at them in retaliation. Therefore, BCMC will let the survivors know by email of progress and guidelines, and seek their input, prior to letting Dan and Loretta know.

6. The survivors shared the many places Dan may have had or currently has the opportunity to enter into inappropriate relationships with children, youth, and vulnerable adults including Hesston College, Hesston parks, and driving older people to medical appointments through local nursing homes, and asked if BCMC could alert these institutions.

7. *[Content has been removed to protect the confidentiality of the survivors.]*

8. [redacted]
   The survivors would like someone or a group of people to provide care to Dan and Loretta; these individuals must have very strong boundaries and the ability to not be manipulated by Dan and Loretta.

9. The survivors expressed their hope that Dawn not address any of this with Dan and Loretta when she is by herself; they also expressed their desire for Dawn to receive adequate support during this process.

10. I expressed the recommendation for BCMC to have trained "listeners" in place prior to any of this information or new guidelines being communicated to BCMC. These listeners should be trained to respond appropriately to victims/survivors and be diverse in gender and age.

11. If Dan begins to attend another Mennonite or other church, the survivors hope BCMC or WDC would notify this next church. Similarly, when BCMC draws up guidelines for Dan's

behaviors, they would like these guidelines shared with any of the churches where the survivors attend.

12. As an overall request, the survivors want survivors to be believed and perpetrators to be questioned at BCMC and other WDC congregations. They do not want victims/survivors to have to carry the burden of safety in these places.

Words of lament were shared and ideas on next steps were generated throughout the conversation. [redacted]

We concluded the conversation by sharing words of affirmation and appreciation for each other and the process.

My added thoughts

The survivors vary (but do not contradict) in their experiences with Dan and Loretta, their level of knowledge about abuse and trauma, and their level of emotional intensity. Similarly, the they vary in their ability to articulate their thoughts and feelings, their level of resilience, and their access to resources, e.g. health insurance to cover therapy, family support, and other things related to well-being. As BCMC and WDC consider and take next steps, they should ensure that each survivor is heard, and that one or two of their voices is not considered as representative of all of them. BCMC and WDC should also partner with the survivors' local churches to be attentive to their individual needs.

BCMC should have an actionable and clearly articulated plan should Dan and Loretta not agree to the agreement or not follow its stipulations. This plan should include a legal or professional referral, and Dan and Loretta having no contact with the church.

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My sincere hope is that BCMC will have the needed knowledge, support, and courage to put significant limitations around Dan's opportunity to bring harm to anyone at BCMC. I hope similar accountability guidelines can be put in place for any other offenders at BCMC as well. Significant support will need to be made available for victim/survivors, Dawn, and BCMC throughout this process.

BCMC needs to have an internal review into what staff and procedures contributed to the delay in appropriate response to this situation, and make any needed changes or offer training. WDC should offer similar resources and support to other WDC churches, utilizing Dove's Nest resources, whenever possible.