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Mennonite Abuse Survivor Speaks out against Church

By Gerry Bellett
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Nelson resident Susan Duncalfe is speaking out against the Mennonite church she grew up in.

When Susan Duncalfe summoned the courage to report her father's sexual assaults on her, her story would uncover not only the calamity of a childhood's stolen innocence, but also how a religious fellowship in the Fraser Valley failed her.

Over the past 20 years, scandals involving illicit sexual relations within churches and the way they were either ignored or covered up have caused untold damage to reputations of churches in Canada and resulted in civil damages that have entered the hundreds of millions of dollars.

In an Abbotsford courtroom earlier this month, Provincial Court Judge John Lenaghan sentenced Susan's father, Kenneth Duncalfe, now a frail 69-year-old, to nine months in jail.

Lenaghan passed judgment, too, on Duncalfe's Mennonite church, the Abbotsford Church of God in Christ, for knowing of his transgressions since 1990 but failing to report them to the police.

His behaviour had first been reported to the church's minister 19 years ago by another family member. As a result, he was summoned before a church assembly and excommunicated for "lasciviousness," a punishment that lasted for a number of months, at the end of which he was allowed to rejoin the congregation.

Assaults started at 14

In a telephone interview from her home in Nelson, Susan Duncalfe, 43, said she had been subjected to hundreds of sexual assaults and molestations starting in 1980, when she was 14.

"It began the night I became a Christian and it lasted until the very day I left the church when I was 22," she said.

“I left the church because I realized once I left, he would stop touching me. Being a member of the church was a very sheltered thing, men were the authority figures, and while I was a member he could touch me with impunity because he knew I wouldn’t complain,” she said.

“The night I told him I had left the church, it stopped.”

By the time he was “outed” to the church assembly, she was 24 and not living at home.

It would take her years before she took the matter to the police. But in 2006, after becoming concerned for the safety of grandchildren who were within her father’s orbit, she gave police a statement.

Asked why she didn’t complain earlier, she said she was too naive. “I was scared. You don’t know if anyone would believe you,” she said.

It was the failure of the church to help her — “I was made to feel like I was not worth looking after” — that caused her to have the court-imposed ban on publication of her identity lifted when the issue finally came to trial.

“They have to open their eyes and change their practices,” she said.

Susan had initially avoided going to the police and wrote a letter to her parents saying the family needed counselling, and that her father needed psychiatric help and therapy.

“Our whole family is dysfunctional and we all needed help. I thought if he got help, and we got help, we could get through it and heal the family,” she said.

The letter resulted in a visit to her home by Pastor Bev Toews of the Abbotsford Mennonite Church of God in Christ.

“He came to Nelson and wanted to see reconciliation between myself and my dad, and didn’t think laying charges against him was the way to go. He told me he was going to get Dad the help he needed and so I left it at that,” she said.

However, she would later discover that Toews was the one doing the counselling, not an outside professional.

“That wasn’t good enough. I went to the police. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

Kenneth Duncalfe pleaded guilty to two counts — sexual assault and indecent assault against his daughter.

His lawyer urged the judge to impose a conditional sentence that could be served at home, but Lenaghan rejected that as inappropriate.

“The degree of culpability of this defendant is enormous. Instead of nurturing and protecting his vulnerable young daughter, he callously and selfishly exploited her for his own sexual gratification,” Lenaghan said.

“The effects his criminal behaviour has wrought on his daughter’s person and life are manifest and tragic. Every child is entitled to an innocent childhood, and to believe that his or her parents are wonderful people who will take care of and protect him or her from harm.

“The defendant robbed his daughter of such a childhood and inflicted great harm upon her. As a result, her life has been characterized by physical and psychological problems, some of which persist,” the judge said.

In a victim impact statement, Susan said the attacks had left her afraid of the dark. She sleeps with her back to the wall, usually on a couch, still needs counselling, suffers flashbacks and has experienced difficulty establishing intimate relationships, she told Lenaghan.

Nine-month sentence

Crown counsel Laura Berman asked for a jail sentence of a year to 18 months for each count.

Lenaghan found a sentence of 15 months for sexual assault to be appropriate, but taking into account the accused’s age and bad health, he reduced it to nine months, with the indecent assault warranting six months. The sentences will be served concurrently.

But Lenaghan was clearly disturbed by what he had heard regarding the church's response to Duncalfe's confession, "which occurred in 1990 when he admitted his sexual involvement with his daughter to members of his church."

Had Duncalfe owned up to his crimes [to the civil authorities] at that time, his daughter might have enjoyed a happier life and "been relieved to some extent of the horrors that bedevil her to this day," the judge said.

"It is clear from the letters of reference written by members of the defendant's family and members of his church that ... they seem to regard his actions as sins and to be of the opinion that the actions taken by the church should suffice as far as punishment is concerned. ...

"The defendant's actions were not merely sins which could be expiated by confession to spiritual mentors, but crimes, offences against the social order which fall to be dealt with by civil society," he said.

"Both the defendant and members of his church appear to have forgotten or ignored the biblical injunctions to render unto Caesar those things that properly belong to Caesar," Lenaghan said.

Judge quite right

Prof. Ross Hastings, who teaches pastoral ethics at the University of B.C.'s Regent College, said Lenaghan couldn't have put it better.

"The judge was quite right in viewing it like that," said Hastings, who teaches clergy their ethical responsibilities at the college, an interdenominational Christian graduate school.

"There is no question these were crimes and should have been reported by the church to the civil authorities," he said.

Any pastor who is told such a thing must report it to the police, he said.

"It's simple and clear. This sort of thing can't be dealt with in-house, although the Mennonite church is of the Anabaptist tradition and tend to be 'antinomian,' that is, to put the church above the law. They have the tendency to believe everything can be solved in-house," he said.

"I categorically tell pastors they can't guarantee confidentiality when someone comes into their office. If they are going to confess a crime — if they tell them, for instance, they have molested a child — the pastor has to tell them he is duty-bound to report crimes to the police.

"That position is supported in the gospel, where it is clear that Christians have to obey the law of the land, except when any law violates the law of God," Hastings said.

He said he knows of an instance where a person confessed to a murder "at the communion table."

"The pastor sought advice from a lawyer and in the end, counselled that person to go with him to the police where he confessed his crime," he said.

The Vancouver Sun was unable to contact Pastor Toews for comment.

But he was interviewed by the Abbotsford News following Duncalfe's sentencing, and said the church didn't inform police of the abuse because the victim was an adult at the time and no longer a member of the congregation.

As for Susan, has the experience shaken her faith?

"I still believe in God. I know what's right and wrong, but my church now is my beliefs. I'm not suggesting the church didn't teach me good things, it did. But I hold on to the more powerful things," she said.

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