What Do I Do Now? Church Leader Decision-Making in Response to Complaints About

One of Their Team Member's Emotionally Harmful Behaviours

by

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CREATIVE COMMONS STATEMENT

Abstract

This phenomenological study explores the obstacles, motivations, supports and gaps church leaders identify as they make decisions when a complaint of emotional harm is submitted against another individual whom the leader oversees. Complaints are made against behaviours that are often nuanced and, to name a few, can include patterns of sarcasm, shaming, overly controlling behaviour, coercion, angry outbursts, or passive aggressive tendencies. A leader responding to a reported complaint encounters obstacles, motivations, supports and gaps in decision-making. Exploring case studies of church leaders, this research utilizes the Insight approach as a framework that attends to the interiority of individual decision-making within complex social contexts. Understanding how leaders make decisions in the face of a complaint of emotional harm can better equip future leaders who are required to respond to similar complaints.

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Introduction

This research explores the phenomenon of a leader's decision-making in a church context when the leader receives a complaint from a church member about a team member's emotionally harmful behaviours - which could include misusing power, manipulation, micromanaging, sarcastic remarks, or angry outbursts. It is through the repetition of these covert, subtle incivilities where harm can occur. These behaviours are challenging to diagnose because there are rarely acute instances of harm, rarely malicious leaders who knowingly inflict harm on others, and rarely blaring red flags that something is wrong. The harm lies in the persistent patterns of behaviours that subtly erode trust and create an environment where "something's not quite right." In the midst of this ambiguity, a church leader is tasked with making decisions about how to process a complaint outlining complex behaviours.

When a member of the church community brings a complaint of emotional harm to a leader, the leaders (who participated in this study) struggled with a number of obstacles related to their various roles that carried their responsibilities and decision-making, including the complexity of the problem, the competing priorities, and contextual church dynamics. While these obstacles challenged response, leaders were motivated to respond because of the impacts to staff culture, the inability for people to flourish in their gifts and the desire to fulfill the role of pastoral shepherd. Leaders relied on the supports of accountability systems they had established, as well as connecting with other peers, and a spiritual consciousness that carried them. Despite this assistance, church leaders still recognized that there are gaps, namely, the absence of policy,

lack of support for the complainant, professional training, and the inner conversion experience that can inform response.

To explore this issue, I used the Insight approach as a framework to guide and interpret the research. The Insight approach is a method of discovery that investigates the interiority of decision-making in conflict (M. Price, 2020). As a researcher using the Insight approach, I focused on what leaders paid attention to, how they understood the issue, the significance they attributed to what they understood, and the decisions that followed. With targeted curiosity towards a leader's interiority, I was able to explore the implicit drivers of behaviour and make them explicit. Uncovering the motivations behind the decisions leaders made in response to a complaint of emotional harm generated insights around the obstacles, motivations, supports, and gaps leaders identified as they responded to a complaint.

This research brought me into the minds and experiences of leaders who have processed a complaint of emotional harm. Through this study, I engaged with leaders on their own terms to better understand the roles they held, how those roles carried their decision-making, the dilemmas they encountered, the options they deliberated and how they came to decide. Targeting curiosity toward each leader fostered in me, as a researcher, an empathy for the complexity and burdens leaders carried in the midst of a complaint. With broadened curiosity, I wondered, how could leaders be better supported to make informed and effective decisions in the midst of a complaint of emotional harm?

I was motivated to conduct this research because I have become increasingly alarmed when churches, intended to be communities of safety and healing, become environments that

incite harm and possibly further perpetuate harm. Each year, more church communities grieve the aftermath of a fallen leader who has abused their power in a way that caused harm to others. It is happening to large scale, megachurches, and my research confirmed that it is not foreign to smaller communities. This study affirms that experienced and well-meaning leaders can struggle with responding to complaints and possibly unintentionally compounding harm.

Finding myself within this system, leading within a Christian church community, I wondered what the greatest point of leverage for change in a system would be, where leaders find themselves ill-equipped to respond to the complainant and how to mitigate the divisive impacts of relational challenges between the complainant and the team member who is accused. Highlighting the problem or speaking to those harmed for greater understanding would be helpful, but I believed that the decision-making of the church leader was the greatest point of leverage to change the harmful patterns of interaction and promote healing. I wondered about the things a leader encountered when responding to a complaint and I was curious about how a Lead Pastor or Board/Elder/Council Chair might effectively lead a process effectively once a complaint of emotional harm was brought to their attention. The interviews I conducted with those who have navigated cases of emotional harm confirmed that more awareness for church leaders is needed around the complexities of emotional harm and more clarity is needed around the processes a leader should follow and the perspectives a leader should consider to effectively respond.

The Question

  Through conversations with leaders across the Canadian conference of the Mennonite Brethren denomination, I explored the phenomenon of complex decision-making when a complaint of emotional harm is brought to a church leader who oversees the person whose behaviours are being questioned. My goals through this research was/were threefold: to increase awareness of the language and nuances around the behaviours in complaints of emotional harm within church contexts, to explore the decision-making of church leaders to gain insights about the obstacles, motivations, supports and gaps when processing a complaint effectively, and, to impact the greater system itself by diagnosing areas of concern, asking questions and engaging leaders through the research in a way that sparked curiosity to generate an ongoing process of reflection and advance more optimal patterns of interaction.

  These hopes led me to ask:

  Question: What obstacles, motivations, supports and gaps do church leaders in the Mennonite Brethren conference in Canada identify when responding to complaints they receive from someone within their organization about misbehaviour from a team member the leader oversees, that the complainant considers to be ongoing and emotionally harmful to the complainant or those they work with?

  Sub Questions. What makes the problem so complex and challenging to respond to? What are the available options, and which have been effective or ineffective in their estimation? What would help them to perform better if anything?

The Insight Approach

This phenomenological study was guided by the Insight approach, which is a method of exploring decision-making in social contexts that illuminates the interiority of decision-making as well as the roles and narratives that carry the way that decisions are made and the impacts of those decisions on others (Jull, 2022). Because research itself is a process of learning and decision-making, using the Insight approach enabled me as a researcher to recognize the interview process as a dynamic site of relational reciprocity between researcher and participant. More than simply asking about the content of events, the Insight approach allows the researcher to explore the empirical evidence of what the mind is doing within interpersonal exchanges (Jull, 2022). Exploring the interiority of leaders' decision-making and the implicit drivers that shaped their decisions enabled both myself as researcher and the leader to engage more deeply with how the leader responded to complaints of emotional harm.

When I used targeted curiosity towards a leader's interiority of decision-making, the context-specific motivations that animated decisions became more evident. Through this process of reflection, leaders were offered the opportunity to reconsider their performance in their role or discover new possibilities. As church leaders reflected on their knowing, valuing, and deciding (Appendix A), this information could be used to improve their future patterns of interaction. Exploring the interiority of leaders operating within a system in a research interview shed light on the ways the system is shaped, what needs to be rethought and what might be more effective ways to intervene (M. Price, 2020).

Locating the Study: North America, Mennonite Brethren, Self

At the time of this writing, there has been an increasing uncovering of harmful behaviours of those leading within churches and a realization of the harmful impacts of those behaviours on others. These broader conversations are taking place widely throughout North America, and more narrowly throughout the local church, in ways that church leaders cannot ignore if they are to effectively fulfill the mission of their organizations/churches. The consequences of poor decision-making reverberate across communities and impact the witness that church organizations can have by the example they set for their own members and external observers. The following sections speak to the present cultural moment that is elevating decision-making in the midst of a complaint of emotional harm within North America and the Canadian Mennonite Brethren conference, as well as how I situate myself within this research.

North America

Stories of misused power are coming to light at increasing rates across Canada, the US and beyond. As I'm writing this (March 28, 2022) a documentary has been released about the abuse in the international church of Hillsong, specifically highlighting the harm caused by the insufficient response of leadership in the wake of complaints (Maloy, 2022). Additional stories of harm, and the subsequent harm caused through failed leadership accountability, are being retold and exposed, including – Willow Creek Church through *A Church Called TOV* by Scott McKnight, Mars Hill Church through *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* by Christianity Today, recent headlines about The Meetinghouse Church (Shellnut, 2022), and Christianity Today reporting about itself (Silliman, 2022). These stories speak to the imperative for churches to

respond with truth and grace, as many report the additional harm that is done when the response to those who come forward is to minimize, dismiss or mishandle the case.

The response of churches or those in authority to excuse, bury, or deflect blame can perpetuate and layer the harmful effects on individuals, in addition to, the culture and effectiveness of an institution. Langberg (2020) emphasizes the significant spiritual power faith communities hold and how easily this influence can be misused or exploited when used to serve a specific agenda rather than to serve the vulnerable. The response of the church, and more explicitly the decision-making of the leader, is integral to the healing of individuals and communities. Through this research I have identified the church leader as the chief decision-maker in cases of reported harm, to which this research has also revealed the absence of unanimous processes that are available to leaders who are tasked with the responsibility to respond.

It is important to note that the rise in high profile churches reporting cases of emotional harm does not indicate that these experiences and harms are isolated to larger church communities. The egregious accounts of high-profile churches can obscure attentiveness towards the misuse of power that is prevalent in communities of all sizes where there are hierarchies and differences in power between individuals in their various roles.

Mennonite Brethren (MB) Denomination

This research is located within and explores the system of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) denomination of churches across Canada. The MB Confession (an articulation of the convictions members of the Mennonite Brethren community hold) speaks to the issue of harm, and response

to harm, in its article on "Love and Nonresistance" that addresses Christian peacemaking (CCMBC, 2018). The interpretation of peace has long been debated in the community and can be confused with the notion that to "keep the peace" is to sustain harmony by not disrupting the status quo. This avoidant interpretation can lead to the possible perpetuation of abuses of power and harmful environments, "People can be effectively silenced from raising issues of concern or from sharing abusive experiences as this could threaten unity" (Oakley and Kinmond, 2014, p. 92). This interpretation of unity and peacemaking can reduce the reporting of issues because the community believes it is their role to not cause disruption.

The MB Confession of Faith outlines peacemaking in this way, "We seek to be agents of reconciliation in all relationships, to practice love of enemies as taught by Christ, to be peacemakers in all situations" (CCMBC, 2018). This definition takes an active stance on peacemaking that places the responsibility on individuals to make peace. Wollf (2013) illuminates the role of a peacemaker to include engaging the issues and being appropriately assertive to protect the vulnerable. Additionally, Miller (2018) likens peacemaking to be distinguished by activity and change, associated with alleviating suffering, reducing strife and promoting justice. Both authors resist the passivity that is often associated with peacemaking, and exhort individuals to respond to reported injustice. With this perspective in mind, this research highlights the dual roles of peacemakers: the exposure of harm by those who bring forward complaints, and the decisions of leaders who are entrusted with the authority to protect those within their care.

Self Location

I grew up attending a Mennonite Brethren (MB) church, continued to serve in this context, and have pastored within an MB church for four years. I am a young leader who has witnessed the strengths and weaknesses of our MB denomination. I have been encouraged by the way the MB denomination has been able to engage in the complexity of interpreting scripture through community hermeneutics; seeking to listen to how the Holy Spirit informs and inspires through collective voices. Similarly, I believe the MB denomination has attracted and raised up faithful, competent, and inspiring leaders. The MBs describe themselves as a family, which appropriately describes the system that my research is hoping to explore, in all of its love, connectedness and promise, in addition to its complexity, messiness, and fracturing.

As a researcher, I am probing around this system from the inside with the motivation to explore areas of concern in order to advance more optimal patterns of interaction. My interconnectedness has afforded me invitation and receptivity and the conversations I was privileged to engage in were amicable. As I relay my findings, I hope the insights and recommendations are read with my aspirations for greater health in mind, rather than being perceived as a threat that triggers a response of defense against my suggestions for change.

My hope is that the Mennonite Brethren denomination is a community that wants to diagnose and treat the problems that inhibit our witness of faith, with the desire to promote safety and healing in the revelation of harm. I want to be part of a system that expands and equips leaders to wrestle with complexity and to be a leading witness in the identification, investigation, and processing of complaints of emotional harm.

Literature Review

There has been an increasing amount of reporting and research published on the ways churches understand and respond to complaints and reports of the misuse of power. This recent research has revealed two factors that significantly contribute to the problem of mishandled responses to detrimental behaviour within Christian churches. The first includes the complexities of this phenomenon that challenge a leader's ability to diagnose and understand the behaviours experienced. The second, involves the physiological, psychological and social factors for individuals situated within organizational structures that can lead to the mishandling of complaints. There is also a rich body of literature on workplace harassment and bullying that relates to the phenomenon I explore. Although this literature review is not exhaustive, I draw out considerations for policy creation and implementation that has been infrequently utilized in church contexts.

Complexities of Diagnosing and Understanding the Reported Behaviour

Many who witness or experience these patterned harmful behaviours themselves have trouble articulating exactly what is wrong (Mullen, 2020). The psychologically damaging behaviours in some cases are subtle but powerful, in other cases are overtly abusive but dismissed as a one-time episode. They include lying, manipulation, gaslighting, isolation, angry outbursts, sarcastic "jokes," ignoring people, invasion of personal space, threats or intimidation, uninvited physical contact, emphasizing authority and status, rigidity and inflexibility, arbitrary decision-making, and placing blame (Ashforth, 1994; Mullen, 2020; Sutton, 2007). Attempts have been made to name or describe the individuals who exhibit these behaviours, such as, petty

tyrant (Ashforth, 1994), the foolish (Cloud, 2013), the diminisher (Wiseman, 2010), the

narcissist (DeGroat, 2020) and even, the asshole (Sutton, 2007). The absence of physical

evidence to reveal harm leads to many reports being denied or dismissed. At times, individual

instances of harmful behaviours can be rationalized or explained away, but it is the culminated

pattern of these subtle harms that leave victims disoriented and questioning their own perception

of experiences. While the behaviour remains widely misdiagnosed and unidentified, additional

contextual realities challenge appropriate response.

Growing Awareness about Workplace Incivilities

Studies have revealed the increased awareness of subtle acts of hostility and incivility in

the workplace and the negative impacts on wellbeing and performance. Defined as "subtle

slights" (Smith & Griffiths, 2022), "subtle discrimination" (Jones et al., 2016), or "workplace

incivility" (Reio & Sanders-Reio, 2011), each have been unanimously linked to costly lack of

productivity, lessened cognitive performance, and emotional distress. Subtle slights are

understood to include a range of negative interactions with ambiguous intent (Reio & Sanders-

Reio, 2011). The nature of the behaviour is low intensity, but nonetheless rude, insensitive and

disrespectful, such that the psychological safety of individuals in the workplace is negatively

impacted (Jones et al., 2016).

The chief concern in identifying and mitigating harm through workplace incivility is the

elusive nature of the problem. Smith and Griffiths (2022) exclaim, "It is difficult to identify,

monitor and address these negative behaviours when their conceptualizations are unclear" (p.4).

Similarly, Crocker et al. (1991) relate the inherent ambiguity in discriminatory behaviours to

limit the target's ability to externally attribute the negative behaviour, leading to reduced

psychological well-being as the target blames himself or herself. Lastly, Reio and Sanders-Reio

(2011) note that interactions can be perceived differently by perpetrators, targets and onlookers

because the intent to harm is not clear. The challenge for leaders, perpetrators and targets to

grasp the concept of harm prevents short-term actions by leaders to alleviate the issue, in

addition to longer-term steps to mitigate and respond effectively through policy development.

The lack of effective and timely response leads to the accumulation of harm that produces

substantial negative impacts (Jones et al., 2016). While the categorization and identification of

the issue is troubling to grasp, it remains an important task to both give weight to people's lived

experiences and to generate understanding in those who have not experienced the behaviours

themselves (Smith & Griffiths, 2022).

The Complaint as Threat: Physiological, Psychological and Social Influences

In addition to the difficulties of the victim identifying and articulating what is wrong, the

troubles are compounded when the target makes a complaint. The physiological, psychological

and social influences for the church leader are such that receiving the complaint may generate a

sense of threat. Among many other concerns, the leader may perceive that the complainant and

their concerns might threaten the leader's sense of competence, drain their time, hurt their team-

member, or create further problems within the community (Jull, 2022).

The leader's physiological reaction to the stress of receiving a complaint about a team

member may compromise their capacity to respond non-defensively in the moment to the

complainant's concerns. When our brains detect a threat, they release a stress response that

provides the energy we need to survive (M. Price, 2019). We are grateful for this automatic

response when our survival depends on it, but in the face of perceived or real social threats this

response hinders clear thinking as our prefrontal cortex is blocked (M. Price, 2019). Responsible

for higher-order thinking, the blockage of information to our prefrontal cortex disrupts our ability

for critical thinking, seeking new information, problem solving and effective decision-making

(M. Price, 2019). In this inhibited state, these 'survival' responses display as a fight, flight,

freeze or fawn response, which the Insight approach categorizes as conflict behaviours (see

Appendix B). A church leader's decision-making capacity can be significantly constrained if a

complaint of emotional harm fosters a sense of threat in their own performance, triggering

conflict behaviours that limit response and exacerbate the issue.

Compounding a leader's physiological response to the threat of a complaint regarding a

team member is the psychological and social dilemma of "willful blindness" among leaders.

Heffernan (2011) defines "willful blindness" as a response to information that you could know

and should know, but somehow you manage not to know, which leaves you willfully blind. This

tendency for individuals to blind themselves to unwelcome truths is a reality that can threaten

any institution, family, culture, or church community. Mullen (2020) argues that this kind of

response among church leaders is particularly problematic, because a church leader has assumed

a position of authority in the lives of others. He therefore contends that church leaders must be

properly equipped and prepared to exercise authority within abusive situations (Mullen, 2020).

The following sections outline the psychological and social factors that can lead to willful blindness in leaders that inhibit decision-making which include cognitive dissonance, conformity, obedience, the bystander effect and motivating gains.

Cognitive Dissonance

When a complaint of emotional harm is brought to the attention of a church leader it can disrupt the reality of what the church leader has always believed to be true. A leader becomes comfortable with the familiar, whether that pertains to relationships, institutions, systems or cultures. Within this comfort of the familiar, people can become blinded to alternatives that threaten to disrupt this reality (Heffernan, 2011). This is understood as cognitive dissonance when individuals become aware of the inconsistencies of their knowledge, opinion or belief about an environment, themselves or an individual's behaviour (Festinger, 1957). When people encounter dissonance, they are motivated to reduce it and avoid situations where this is the case (Festinger, 1957). The same motivation to minimize the discomfort applies to leaders who are forced to confront the dissonance between their perception of reality and the opposing reality that a complaint of emotional harm presents.

Further entrenching this avoidance and dismissal is the brain's response to threat that reduces the ability to take in new information. This results in a tunnel vision effect that fixates on a singular thing, reduces external information and leads to a confirmation bias – confirming what we already believe to be true (M. Price, 2019). When painful experiences are brought to the attention of a church leader this cognitive dissonance can threaten the sustained reality that the person who was hired in a pastoral role is loving, selfless, and has the best intentions for those

they care for. With a church leader who is predisposed to believe that people are 'good,' it can

lead to confusion when the experience of harm does not match the 'outward appearance' that the

individual presents (Oakley & Humphrey, 2018). This dissonance is extremely painful, and

many, especially when systems are threatened, simply choose to eliminate the dissonance

(Heffernan, 2011). The mind's propensity to eliminate dissonance is explained through reduced

cognitive functioning that sustains a selective perception of events, distorting understanding of

the problem (M. Price, 2019). People are quick to believe the reassuring lie that protects a system

rather than facing the inconvenient truth (Langberg, 2020). This elimination of dissonance can

take place through denying the truth or alienating the victim rather than addressing the

behaviours that generated the complaint (Langberg, 2020). Langberg (2020) asserts that

overcoming the cognitive dissonance by exploring the facts of the reported behaviour is critical

in creating the necessary motivation to respond empathetically and diligently. Seeking the truth

and exploring the facts presents new information that can expand minds, regulate the body's

defense system, and allow for greater consciousness in decision-making.

Conformity

In addition to the lack of willingness to hear alternate realities, and the threat-induced

cognitive deficiency of tunnel vision, a compounding issue is the social reality of conformity to

maintain the status quo. Widespread social support is a powerful force in sustaining detrimental

behaviours. Humans often avoid conflict and change, and therefore, foster a preference for

ignorance over the knowledge that would demand action (Heffernan, 2011). Additionally, many

remain silent against injustices because they believe that their voice will not make a difference.

This social phenomenon is dangerous to church leaders in authority because their position of power leaves them especially blind to what is happening to those more vulnerable. Church leaders are unable to see issues of harmful behaviours if witnesses are conforming to the silence. People erroneously believe that confronting the issue is unkind or unnecessarily disruptive, and therefore, minimize, justify, or excuse the actions to maintain consistency (Mullen, 2020). Sadly, this negligence only enables individuals to misuse their power and exacerbates the instances where people are put in harm's way.

Obedience

Another dynamic church leaders must mitigate is the tendency for witnesses of the behaviour to blame their silence or lack of reporting on their obedience to the specifics of their role, effectively enabling the continuation of harm. Other team members who could speak to the reported behaviours may argue that they were simply doing what they were told, whether this includes performing their departmental responsibilities, remaining silent, or enabling abusive behaviour in another way (Heffernan, 2011). Church leaders are shielded from making informed decisions when others in the organization default to the hierarchical structures and choose to "stay in their lane." This manifestation of obedience protects the hierarchies in place at the expense of the victims of abuse (Mullen, 2020).

The Bystander Effect

While obedience causes people to stand watch and freeze because they believe it is outside of their control, the "bystander effect" deters people from speaking out because they believe that action would have taken place already if harm was truly being done. In a similar

vein, the more witnesses there are to an emergency the fewer will intervene (Darley, 1960). As

noted above, the problematic behaviours are generally not straightforward instances of grievous

harm to the extent that it causes bystanders to question what is taking place, how to respond

appropriately, and whether it is their responsibility to respond at all, which results in inaction as

people assume that others will take responsibility (Heffernan, 2011). This bystander effect

further isolates those who have been harmed and causes them to question their experience

because no one else is recognizing and speaking out against the harm (Heffernan, 2011).

Motivating Gains

The final factor that limits the ability for church leaders to see and deal with the harmful

behaviours exhibited within their responsibility, is the equivalent to the economic gains that

demoralizes for-profit organizations. While churches are non-profitable organizations, and

therefore not seeking to make capital gains, there are other measures of success that can blind

people to the behaviours around them. Corporations can dehumanize people by prioritizing

money above anything else; similarly, churches can become distracted by the success that a

charismatic leader contributes to a ministry over and above seeking justice for those claiming

harm. Charismatic narcissists may be misdiagnosed and alternatively described as, "charismatic,

gifted, confident, smart, strategic, agile and compelling" (DeGroat, 2020, Loc. 116), even though

they cause significant harm to those around them. Many Christians will justify and accept being

deceived by these behaviours because they believe it is for the sake of the ministry (Langberg,

2020). What is often missed is that the ministry can be falsely built upon systemic narcissism

that is sustained through structure, shame, and control (DeGroat, 2020). When motivating gains

are misguided towards the influence of the charismatic, action should be taken to reorient towards motivations that support the health of the church.

Workplace Harassment Policies

In addition to the complexity to the patterns of behaviour that cause harm, and the physiological, psychological, and social factors that can lead to the mishandling of complaints by church leaders, there is extensive literature on workplace harassment that can provide guidance to adequately respond to these complaints that has not been commonplace in church contexts. Oakley and Kinmond (2014) specifically note the lack of training and awareness in policy development in churches that should be routine, "This [gap of training] needs to be addressed in order to ensure that issues such as healthy church management, understanding of different forms of abuse and effective knowledge of policy and practice are updated and maintained by those working in positions of trust within the church" (p. 93). As a result, many churches are ill-equipped to process complaints of emotional harm and lack the necessary policies to support their response to a report that is made (Oakley & Kinmond, 2014). The following will briefly identify how policies can support organizations in systematically managing reporting and the processing of complaints. Recommendations for effective safeguarding and policy development and implementation needs further attention by those in leadership positions with the church, for the benefit of both people experiencing harm and those working and processing complaints (Oakley & Kinmond, 2014).

Policy Creation and Implementation

Richards and Daly (2003) emphasize the need for leaders to implement policies to orient the mindset of the individuals around the desired culture and to define acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in the workplace. Additionally, policies outline a process forward that has been thoughtfully considered for the specific organization. In this way, policies cannot be copied and pasted, but instead, must be specific to the workplace to reflect the broader culture of the institution (Salin, 2008). Leaders are to personally be involved in the creation of policies to show ownership that promotes a universal adoption and implementation of the policy (Salin, 2008). The role of upper management (including church leaders) in the creation and implementation of policies is often overlooked, but this can be a critical mistake. This abdication of responsibility by senior managers can contribute to a culture where abuse is ignored or tolerated (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008).

Church-specific policies are important to address the cultural practices that can limit reporting of harm and processing of complaints. For example, the high integration and overlapping relationships in a church context, in addition to a lack of awareness around emotional harm, can impede formal processes and accountability. Where relational unity is highly valued, those with concerns can feel burdened to hide their experiences out of fear that sharing them would threaten unity (Oakley & Kinmond, 2014). Additionally, the limited awareness around psychological and emotional abuse within the church can lead to many complaints being characterized as too "politically correct" or too subjective to be reliable (Oakley & Kinmond, 2014).

Prioritizing policy creation and implementation by church leadership ensures that there

are measures in place before a claim of abuse is made. MCC Abuse Response & Prevention

(2022) acknowledges, "Creating an ad-hoc process in the aftermath of an abuse disclosure will

cause more harm to victims and all those involved." For church leadership to publicly share

policies it "sends a positive signal to past survivors, to newcomers, to professionals, that the

church takes abuse prevention seriously" (MCC Abuse Response & Prevention, 2022). Church

leaders should prioritize the strengthening of policy and practice in churches to raise awareness

of the issues and to support the procedures of reporting (Oakley & Kinmond, 2014).

Impacts

Within a church setting, significant harm can be done to complainants who can feel

unsafe or deeply question their faith (Oakley & Humphreys, 2019). When this harm takes place

within a church context leaders have a significant responsibility to protect the victim, but sadly,

many individuals are re-abused within the church through the process of coming forward

(Hoffman, 2018). Instead of being met with empathy, victims are often put on the defense.

Mullen (2020) captures this harmful effect when he describes the painful moment a survivor

endures as they finally tell their story to the leaders of the organization, expecting to be met with

light but instead they are met with the disorientation of further darkness in the forms of denial,

rejection or resistance. In addition to addressing the negative impacts on individuals, church

leaders should be further motivated to respond because of the impacts of the team-member's

emotionally harmful behaviour on the greater organization.

Neglecting to create, uphold and effectively implement policy responses to reported

workplace bullying or abuse can be incredibly costly for organizations. If emotionally harmful

behaviour is left to perpetuate, many, led to despair, leave the organization and will leave behind

co-workers who have been drained of effectiveness (Sutton, 2007). If this patterned harmful

behaviour is sustained, others within the organization can adopt a learned helplessness, adapting

to the misery they believe is beyond their control (Cloud, 2013). Direct costs to an institution

include increased medical costs, increased claims, and increased lawsuits (Lutgen-Sandvik &

McDermott, 2008). More indirectly, employers suffer as a result of low-quality work, reduced

productivity, high turnover rates, loss of creativity, depression, anxiety, burnout, self-esteem

issues, stress and the time spent making sense of abuse (Ashforth, 1994; Sutton, 2007; Lutgen-

Sandvik & McDermott, 2008).

Conclusion

This literature review reveals the challenges for targeted individuals to detect and name

the harmful behaviours that can be patterned over a period of time, as well as some

physiological, psychological and social factors that may prevent these behaviours from being

recognized, challenged or addressed by others. Additionally, this literature review highlights

some of the existing literature on workplace bullying and harassment and how this can inform

policy creation to support responses to complaints of emotional harm.

Methodology

Phenomenology

Creswell and Posh (2018) explain phenomenological research as the process of generating common meaning based on the investigation and description of the lived experience of several individuals with regard to a specific phenomenon. Phenomenology originated from the writings of Edmund Husserl, who emphasized the importance of studying a lived experience, eliciting more conscious awareness of this experience, and producing descriptions (rather than explanations or analyses) of the essences of these experiences (Creswell & Posh, 2018).

My interest in the phenomenon of leaders' *decision-making* in response to a complaint of emotional harm required a phenomenological approach that was distinct from a study of observable behaviours. I needed a methodology that could explore decision-making itself as a cognitional phenomenon, as an interior process that leaders could reflect on and discuss with me to further illuminate their lived experience.

Lonergan's Cognitional Theory

Allied with phenomenology, Bernard Lonergan's cognitional theory offers social science researchers a methodological framework to explore the interiority of decision-making and insight (Melchin & Picard, 2008; Jull, 2022). Price (2018) drew on Lonergan's foundational work to create Insight method, based on a model of the patterned flow of consciousness, to distinguish and relate seven distinct conscious operations of decision-making that include experiencing, understanding, verifying, valuing, deliberating, evaluating, and deciding (see Appendix A). Jull (2022) applied Price's model in her own phenomenological study that explored the interiority of

conflict and change-making. Jull (2022) used cognitional theory to pay attention to what individual minds were doing when they decided to disagree, build peace, avoid, or flee. I was influenced by Jull's phenomenological research and interested in using cognitional theory as a way to orient and structure my research and analysis into church leaders' decision-making dilemmas as they received and responded to complaints of emotional harm. Insight method draws on Lonergan's articulation of his phenomenological analysis of the interiority of decision-making.

Method

Insight

As noted above, Insight method draws on Lonergan's cognitional theory to study the interiority of individual decision-making (knowing, valuing and deciding) within complex social contexts (J. Price, 2018). In addition to paying attention to the research participants' interiority, the method also helped me to become more consciously aware of my own process of decision-making as a researcher conducting interviews and interpreting the discoveries.

Insight Interviews

Using Insight as a method allowed me to structure the interviews as reciprocal conversations that explored elements of uncertainty that the leaders expressed, creating the opportunity to further illuminate the complexity of decision-making within the horizon of their role (Appendix C). I conducted semi-structured Insight interviews that invited them to pay attention to how they used their minds as they made decisions (reflexive self-awareness) (Jull, 2022).

As I interviewed leaders my analytical attention was focused on their decision-making, but to understand how they came to make decisions, I had to (together with the participant) explore the cognitive actions that preceded their decisions. Through targeted and curious questioning, we (myself and the leader) attended to their understanding and valuing, wondering "How and what did they value? What options did they consider? What was carrying them?"

Each interview was conducted and recorded through the video conferencing software, Zoom. I began each interview by attending to the process. To put participants at ease, I connected with them informally, discussed the timing of the interview, inquired about any concerns with confidentiality after they had read the consent forms (see Appendix D) and then outlined how the conversation would be conducted. After my initial few interviews, I recognized it was helpful to provide some specifics about Insight and how the interview was better understood as a conversation. I explained how I would be curious alongside them, that they should not feel like they need to have all the answers, but that we would follow their experience with mutual curiosity to discover what might previously have been puzzling or unrecognized in their decision-making process of conscious awareness.

I interviewed the first participant three times consecutively from September through October. Each interview was a process of deepening, beginning with an overview of this leader's experiences and moving towards increased reflection and understanding. Between November and December, I interviewed five more individuals, interviewing one of the leaders twice for a total of six interviews. Out of these five individuals, three of them spoke to personal experiences of a complaint of emotional harm being reported to them. The other two leaders did not have

first-hand experiences and spoke broadly about their perceptions of potential dilemmas. From

January to March, I had supplementary interviews with two participants, and then four more

interviews with additional leaders (where one had first-hand experience and the other three spoke

hypothetically). In total, from September to March, I conducted 15 interviews, with ten different

church leaders, exploring six scenarios of a report of emotional harm and five leaders speaking to

the issue abstractly (see Appendix E).

Recruiting

At the outset of this project, I presumed that recruiting church leaders for participation

might be a challenge. There were multiple factors that I attributed to this potential difficulty: the

sensitivity of the subject matter regarding behavioural complaints, the challenge of finding

leaders who have encountered this type of complaint, and the difficulty leaders face in

recognizing when this complaint has been raised in their own setting.

I began with a leader I knew personally, who was gracious and willing to be interviewed

about their experience in responding to a complaint of emotionally harmful behaviour directed

against someone they supervised. By snowballing, this participant put me in contact with an

additional leader I could interview. From there I reached out to the National Faith and Life Team

within the CCMBC, which is a team dedicated to the spiritual health of Mennonite Brethren

churches with the desire to support and educate churches on organizational health. This became

an additional avenue in solidifying three more interview participants. The remaining participants

were obtained through cold calling leaders within the MB conference. I inquired about their

experiences with complaints of emotional harm and a handful agreed to be interviewed. See Appendix F for recruitment forms.

Throughout the process, I grew increasingly curious as to the causes around the difficulty in recruiting participants. As I reached out to leaders, some expressed that "this happens all the time," while others could not think of a single example in their entire career. I wondered if there might be a reluctance from leaders to engage in such a sensitive topic, however, my experience was that anyone I asked was receptive to my inquiries, especially since many of the leaders have a posture of discipleship to support young leaders. I felt overall that leaders were eager to help in my research and wanted to work towards solutions to the problems I identified. I wondered instead: is there a lack of acknowledgement around these issues so that leaders do not recognize them, or consider them of lesser significance than other concerns? Could it be that the problem is minimized because complainants struggle to bring their experiences forward due to the perceived disruption of harmony and the impact on God's work?

Analysis

I used an Applied Thematic Analysis (ATA) as an inductive process to generate themes in the emergent data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, Insight was used both as a method of inquiry – remaining curious to understand the conflict behaviours and decision-making – as well as a form of analysis to understand my findings and make sense of the data. Beginning with transcriptions processed through the advanced speech recognition software, Descript, codes were gathered through an emphasis of noticing, collecting, and thinking (Seidel, 1998). This process was iterative and progressive because of the cyclical nature of thinking that

led me to notice new aspects of the data, which then led me to collect varying information for

future participants (Seidel, 1998). The codes were understood as units of meaning in the form of

phrases, paragraphs or sentences. Insight was used to filter the units of meaning by focusing on

how leaders came to understand and verify, followed by their valuing and process of decision-

making (Appendix A). The data revealed themes surrounding the description of the behaviour

exhibited by the team member in question, the process of inquiry into the complaint, the patterns

distinct to a church context, the accountability systems that were in place, busyness, the impact

of the behaviours, motivations for church leaders, the decisions that were made and the sources

of support available to church leaders. From this initial coding, themes emerged around the

obstacles, motivations, supports and gaps leaders identified as they processed a complaint of

emotional harm about a team member.

Writing as a Process of Inquiry

Additional meaning was generated through writing as a process of inquiry that acted as a

supplementary method of exploratory data collection and analysis. Writing in this way created a

dynamic and creative process to explore the contexts, the conversations, the relationships, and

the constraints I was within that allowed for critical reflexivity to colour the finished product of

my writing. This method of discovery further aligned with the way Insight pays particular

attention to the operations of the mind. Throughout the duration of this study, I could use my

subjectivity and internal consciousness as empirical evidence to what I was experiencing and as a

way to relate to the subjectivity of participants. My own reflexivity created a process of

meaning-making that was simultaneous to interviews, analysis and writing which fostered my

own voice within the research and recognized my own interiority as a significant source of data.

This process of reflexivity and intersubjectivity was advanced through the writing of

reflexive memos as a method of exploratory understanding (Richardson & Pierre, 2005). These

memos carried the writing and analysis process towards deeper meaning as I was consciously

aware of the contexts I found myself in, the emotions I felt throughout interviews and the

broader conversations that were happening within organizations and religious institutions

simultaneous to my research. In this way, my own introspective accounts advanced mutuality

between the subjectivity of myself and of the participants. This placed my own interiority as

relevant in the process of this study.

Reflexive Check-Ins

An additional source of reflexivity and introspection was compounded through regular

check-ins with my thesis supervisor which functioned as a process of reflexivity where we were

able to dialogue around next steps, reflect on interviews and my own felt responses, and to

discuss the ideas I was engaging in as they developed over the course of the year. It was through

these meetings that I was able to foster the development of my own voice, continually discover

through reflections from my supervisor, and advance my research significantly through

expansive contemplations and challenges. These conversations were recorded to support

increased learning and reflections by reviewing the dialogue.

Having established the conceptual and methodological foundations that guided this

research and how knowledge was generated, the following discusses the findings of this

research, beginning with the cases of church leaders who made decisions in the midst of a

complaint of emotional harm.

Findings

Summary of Case Studies

These cases present varying descriptions of a church leader's responses to complaints

about one of their team member's emotionally harmful behaviours. No leader I spoke with

seemed to have the sense of, 'This is what you do,' instead, they each offered accounts of how

they navigated their way forward. There were expressions of regret, lack of understanding, Holy

Spirit intervention, loneliness and despair. Each case study below has been condensed and

summarized from a church leader's (CL) narration of events and behaviours.

"Walking on eggshells"

M was a team member who gradually developed a sense of bitterness and resentment

towards those she worked with because they did not understand the unique challenges she faced

in her role. She began to characterize her work with an "us vs. them" mentality which escalated,

"Eventually the staff came to the point of kind of walking on eggshells around her and not

knowing how to manage because she was reactionary." At first the Church Leader (CL) did not

experience the same behaviours and was unsure how to confront her because of the years of

relationship that fostered empathy in the CL and a default to defend her actions. Over time she

exhibited the same patterns to the CL where she accused the CL of being against her. It became

evident to the CL that her behaviours were creating an overall 'unhealth' on the staff team. The

CL tried to address the concerns with her behaviour, but she did not respond with a desire to

personally reflect or change her behaviours. The CL decided to bring a mediator in for support.

Seeing no changes in her behaviour or willingness to change, the CL decided she had to be

released, but acknowledged that the process was delayed for too long, "because I had to address

it and again, in hindsight, there are many things that I wish I would have confronted sooner. I

wish I would have confronted it stronger."

"He did not receive feedback or criticism well"

        B was a pastor who was, "Somewhat socially awkward, like wasn't really strong

relationally with people, but very gifted in the work that he did." He worked independently and

did not collaborate well. He did not receive feedback or criticism well and became very difficult

to work with. As a result his behaviours led to, "A lot of pain, confusion, carnage and he just

responded to people in harsh ways and cold, abrupt ways that I typically didn't experience

because I was a supervisor and I had a different kind of relationship." For many years the CL

gave B the benefit of the doubt and attempted to defend him, thinking that others should loosen

their expectations of him. Eventually the CL brought in a mediator to attempt to work through

the issues, but B's behaviours persisted. Although the CL hoped that this kind of pressure would

cause B to leave or seek out other job opportunities, B remained. Motivation to act grew when

the CL started to notice more and more people leaving the ministry and started to hear rumblings

of more concerns. Years of attempting to have B understand the impact of his behaviours, with

no change, led to the CL releasing B from his role.

"Came across in a way that just was received so differently than what he intended"

J used spiritual language and actions to lead and influence his team, but while he intended to encourage, his actions felt manipulative and his derogatory tone was not received well, "He had just really good intentions and just really wanted to be faithful to God and encourage people in their own discipleship and challenge them in both their work patterns and as well as their own spiritual lives, but came across in a way that was received so differently than what he intended." The CL brought in a mediator, attempting to resolve the issues, but it was unsuccessful. The CL personally did not experience these behaviours but could see and smell the "smoke" that people were talking about and pointing to. The CL continued to wonder "how bad could it be?" The CL reprimanded J and gave him tighter boundaries, but he continued to function in his role.

"Choosing between competency and character"

Over time, the CL started to see a pattern of C's behaviour. This included a "lack of responsibility or ownership," "blame shifting," "no teachable spirit," "everything just became a point of conflict," and there was "never an apology." These persistent actions led to an erosion of trust with the staff team because of the little things that happened over and over again, "We were choosing between competency and character….and I think we made the wrong choice for quite a while." Beginning to see the impacts on the broader staff culture, the CL was motivated to act, but felt conflicted because of his close relationship with C. The CL heightened accountability and expectations for C, which led to C asking for a temporary leave. C resigned from the role and never returned.

"There isn't an ability to accept that or to be held accountable"

T left people feeling unsafe, pressured, unheard, and at times, creeped out, "It's not a sexual, it's not a physical abuse, but it's clearly bullying. It's clearly abusive." When called to account for his behaviour, he flips the script and labels the accuser as abusive to him, "The narcissist piece seems to be that when you push back there isn't an ability to accept that or to be held accountable." The CL tried to confront T on his patterns of behaviour that were causing harm, but each time he deflected and defended his behaviours. T removed himself from his role under the CL and continues to lead and his church continues to grow. The inability to resolve the issues led the CL to work towards developing processes and policies to support future cases requiring response.

"They left a trail of hurting staff members"

P had an extraordinary ability to dream and execute what seemed to be impossible. She showed "initiative and was a self-driven, motivated," person. What became evident over time was that "She left a trail of hurting staff members who were under this particular individual in order to get results." P's behaviour left an impact on others, "When it comes to managing those who are under her, subordinates to her would come in tears, literal tears, about how they felt." People felt "undervalued," "disrespected," and this person was "undermining," and "cutting to people." The abuse that was happening was not "in your face," but rather, "passive aggressive." After a significant blow-up, the CL discerned that P's behaviour did not match the staff culture. The CL initiated an investigation into P's behaviour and despite the incredible results P was producing in the ministry, the relational cost and the harmful impact on the staff culture was too

great. The CL assessed the severity of the reports in the investigation and determined that P

needed to be let go.

Themes

Exploring the case studies through each leader's process of decision-making, leaders

identified obstacles, motivations, supports and gaps they experienced when responding to a

complaint of emotional harm about another team member, from someone the team member

oversaw. The obstacles they encountered included, the problem itself being complex, a

perception that the team member was not "all bad," the competing priorities a leader juggled and

some of the distinct characteristics that challenge response in a church context. In light of these

obstacles, participants named how they were motivated to act because of the importance of

creating a healthy staff culture, needing to allow people to flourish in their gifts, and the

fulfillment of their role as pastor/shepherd. While navigating these complaints leaders expressed

the supports that helped them through their decision-making which included having

accountability measures pre-emptively in place, reaching out to their peers for support, and a

consciousness to the Spirit. Finally, church leaders reflected on the gaps that need to be

addressed such as policy, support for complainants, professional support and training, as well as,

an inner conversion experience that can offer perspective. The following section speaks to the

obstacles leaders faced when responding to a complaint of emotional harm.

The Problem is Complex

Church leaders are tasked with making decisions when a complaint of emotional harm is

made, but how they respond is challenged when the problem is not clear to the church leader, it

is not clear to the team member, and additionally, the problem is not so easily articulated by the complainant experiencing the harm. One church leader described the challenge of identifying the behaviour this way, "In some ways I think it's really subtle for the most part and yet I think for some people it's not at all subtle. And so, that's part of what makes it challenging." In summarizing the behaviours, church leaders described the team member exhibiting behaviours that amounted to creating and influencing unhealthy cultures and toxic environments, and behaviours that caused emotional distress to the targets. Some of the defining behaviours included, "strong competency but relationally challenged," "spiritual manipulation", "good intentions with manipulative impacts," "lacking self-awareness," "blame shifting or deflecting," "unteachable," "creepy or unsafe," "bullying," "narcissistic personality," and "an unwilling spirit towards accountability." Impacts to the culture or environment included: "walking on eggshells," "toxic environment," and an "erosion of trust." Impacts to the complainant were noted as feeling "bullied," "under-valued and disrespected," "demeaned, harassed, and abused," and coming to a church leader reporting the behaviour "in tears."

The leader faces many challenges in responding to a complaint about a team member who displays these characteristics, but chief among them was the inability of the team member to see their behaviours and the impact on others. Church leaders who have confronted the team member about their behaviour are most often met with denials or minimizing the behaviour. Some team members responded to the leader by deflecting blame back on to the church leader or to the complainant, other team members dismissed the behaviours as a misunderstanding of their good intentions, still others seemed to receive the feedback but then did nothing to change or

provide evidence that they understand the complaint made against them. How a team member responded heavily influenced the decisions of a church leader proceeding, as the pre-existing relationship had an impact on a leader's judgment, convincing them that good intentions voids impact, or convincing them that the team member will change, both of which distract the church leader from taking action to hold the team member accountable.

Another element that makes the problem so complex for the church leader includes the target not being able to name the behaviours in a way that the church leader can understand and respond to. One leader noted the difficulty a target faces in confronting the behaviour and conveying the behaviours to a church leader:

The problem is if I'm a jerk to you, you might be afraid to come and tell me what's up, because I am the abuser. I'm the bully and so you coming to me might end up with you having to lose your job, or you don't want to be walking on eggshells around me and for it to be weird. So what are you going to do? Just suck it up? But if you go to a boss who's above me and then our boss who's above comes and tells me, then I could have a conversation with you that is very passive aggressive. I could say, "You can do whatever you want. I mean, obviously you can go tell them, but I can't believe that you could actually do that. I thought we were friends. I'm really disappointed. I can't believe that you would do that." And that's all I'm saying. And then I walk away. How will you be left feeling? Now there's something between us and they will never trust you again and anytime you see me, you will be reading all my actions and my attitude toward you through that lens.

The above account highlights some of the difficulty and complexity that surrounds a complainant speaking out, namely, how going directly to the person who has caused harm when there is a power differential creates a risk that the relationship will never recover or that trust cannot be rebuilt. This participant has highlighted the problematic nature of requiring individuals to raise their concerns directly to the person who oversees them, without support.

The Team Member is not "all bad." How a leader framed the problem and characterized the behaviour of the team member influenced the decisions that followed the complaint being raised. Some leaders assumed that a person who had no intention of harming someone was not capable of causing harm, "They're just doing a certain behaviour, not thinking it's hurtful, but this person is wholly taking it as being, you know, spiteful maybe even malicious or, or abusive. So it's a matter of interpretation on their part." In other scenarios leaders had a tunnel vision focus on the competency of the individual to complete tasks, but neglected to address the lapses in character that were impacting others. Leaders may also solely estimate the level of concern based on their own experiences with the individual in question:

> Usually when somebody is coming to me with a complaint about an employee, if I've never experienced that, you know, there's a good chance that, you know, maybe it's unfounded or they're not quite seeing the full picture.

Several leader/research-participants acknowledged that a team member may act differently towards someone in a position of power over them, and that not everyone's experience of a team member's behaviour may be the same,

> The person that I saw was much more responsive, more collegial, more lighthearted, easier to work with, but the coworkers around him were experiencing that at times, but they also experienced another side that was very different, which was very difficult to work with.

This leader's description that the team member's behaviour varied based on who they interacted with gives further evidence to the complexity of identifying the behaviour, the framing of that behaviour, and the subsequent response of the church leader.

Competing Priorities - "The overwhelming relentless nature of issues"

All interview participants noted the obstacle of a time restraint when a complaint was raised in the midst of other demanding and ongoing ministry concerns. It was noted that, "One of the biggest challenges for leaders is just the challenge of leadership and the overwhelming relentless nature of issues that keep washing on your shore that are just never stopped." The needs of the ministry continued to compound in the midst of a complaint coming forward and there were other priorities, "The very sustenance of the organization is also at hand, the very future of the organization." Another leader-participant noted the limited capacity each leader had in their role, "You've only got so much capacity and so there are seasons where this thing just kind of goes on pause and you're focused on a different crisis." The priority of a case of emotional harm became relative to other issues the leader was currently facing. The significance attributed to a complaint directly influenced the urgency of engagement, and many hesitated to address concerns because they forecasted the domino effect of crises'. The temptation (and sometimes the reality) was to put the complaint on the 'back burner' or to push pause while other

pressing needs arose. According to several participants, the competing demands and the relative priority given to complaints of emotional harm resulted in many decisions and processes being instigated half-heartedly or unintentionally.

The Distinct Characteristics of a Church Context

The decision-making of a church leader regarding a complaint of emotional harm takes place within the greater system of the church including: the environment, the people, the beliefs/values, and the normative practices that influence processes of healing and decision-making. Participant-leaders expressed relational connection and accountability, the lack of outside resourcing, trying to prevent gossip, and using isolated Scripture passages as an authoritative guide, as factors within a church context that created obstacles to response.

Relational Connection and Accountability between the Church Leader and the Team Member- "The bottom line is people's lives." The relational emphasis in church communities can be an obstacle to effectiveness that leads to a fear of decision-making in a church leader and a challenge to accountability. A complaint of emotional harm raised, and the subsequent decisions made, can have significant impacts on the wider community of congregation members, staff and, especially, those who are implicated in the complaint. Leaders explained this reality, "Working in a church where you're working with colleagues who you've worked with for years, you're a big part of hiring them. You're intertwined relationally in all kinds of ways." One leader spoke to the regrets of creating an environment that made it difficult for him to do what was best for the church because he hired a friend of his who needed to be released due to his harmful behaviours.

The culture of a church staff is highly relational. As one leader noted, "We're so relationally focused, right? The bottom line isn't the dollar, the bottom line isn't even growth, the bottom line is people's lives and seeing them transformed and caring for people through thick and thin." People are highly valued in a church environment, which can be distinct from a corporate setting, "You don't want to treat the church like a business. You want to work with people and you want to be friends with your staff." This relational distinction became a challenge when it impacted decision-making, "Because we almost value relationships beyond effectiveness and, out of fear, we don't ever make any decisions or changes so that just handcuffs churches or denominations. We become stagnant and the lowest common denominator just becomes our operating level." Another leader similarly expressed, "We're uber relational, right. So you want it to work the best, but sometimes that becomes an achilles heel when you don't have the appropriate next steps. Like if it's this level of allegation or concern." Church leaders noted that their role required both holding staff accountable, but then simultaneously pastoring those very same people, "So how do I continue being your pastor, support you during the hard times of life, and yet tell you that you are actually not delivering on the expectations of your role, and we might have to go in different directions." These accounts highlight how when allegations arose, relationships within the community complicated the process of decision-making for a church leader.

Lack of Outside Resourcing: "The church feels like it needs to solve its own problems." Leaders expressed a pattern of church leadership relying on their own discernment instead of accessing outside support, "Sometimes the church feels like it needs to solve its own

problems when really there's all kinds of people who are experts in trauma and abuse and providing appropriate support." Rather than relying on experts, outside resources or organizational structures that could support decision-making, the lack of formality in processes left too much up to the discernment of the leader, "Churches are slower to learn and be informed around abuse, and boundaries are fuzzy where people are friends with those in leadership." It was noted that some of the harm done by churches was unintentional, but that speaks to the need for churches to seek outside resourcing, "Where people aren't meaning to write things off or meaning to sweep things under the carpet, I think people aren't totally informed or aware of what to do." Leaders emphasized the obstacles churches face in the absence of clear processes, "So if a complaint comes forward and we don't have the systems and structures in place to navigate that appropriately, or with clarity, as you might in some more highly structured organizations, and this person's a friend of this person, it gets really messy." Leaders acknowledged the need for more formal processes that can protect and support church leaders in their decision-making in the midst of highly relational dilemmas.

Alternatively, team members being held accountable can use the ambiguity of processes to their advantage in a church setting:

If a situation is to their advantage from a work perspective, they will want you to follow the law legally, because from a work perspective, as an employee, I am owed this, which is true, which is right.… But when the employees are, let's say on the wrong side, if they're at fault, then in some way, they expect you to remember that you're a church and

therefore you have to provide forgiveness and grace and second chances. So there's this

weird world for pastors.

In the absence of clear processes and outside resourcing, church leaders were left to discern on a

case by case basis, where relationships and church distinctions proved challenging.

Leaders recognized that formal processes can protect leaders from needing to make

critical decisions in times of distress when their thinking is not at its best. Additionally, without

outside resourcing to help guide a process forward, the interconnectivity could prevent leaders

from asking the relevant and necessary questions that could help to support more complex

discernment of the issues.

Trying to Prevent Gossip. Multiple church leaders wrestled with whether or not

concerns being raised by a complainant constituted gossip. This created an obstacle for leaders

discerning what was of higher concern, the fear of "gossip" or the behaviour that was being

reported. Within church settings, one leader spoke to how this fear of gossiping can prevent the

exposure of truth,

And so that's part of the problem in the Christian Church is that because of those values,

which are good biblical values, but we actually hold back from speaking truth, which

we're also told to do is to speak the truth in love. And so people aren't speaking the truth

because they think, well, that's just gossip then, but no, if you've experienced this, I

mean, it's not gossip.

This leader distinguished that a complaint is not gossip but is a revelation of truth. Another

leader expressed their own fear of whether or not inquiring into the problem is considered to be

gossip or not, "You know, you're always questioning, am I gossiping? Am I saying too much?"

This same leader used their existing knowledge of the person reporting to discern whether

gossiping was taking place:

> Usually taking the context, the person who's bringing the complaint to me…it actually
>
> allows me to have a level of discernment on what may or may not be actually
>
> happening…Are they typically a person of integrity? Do they talk behind people's backs
>
> often? You know, is this a pattern of behavior on their end? …If my experience with that
>
> person has been, you know, they don't typically gossip, that they are people that generally
>
> speak honouring and well of others…then I usually treat it a little bit differently.

Within a church setting, these leaders named the challenge of understanding the complaint, while

balancing the fear that discussing the issue may constitute gossip, and how this fear can prevent

the truth from being exposed.

Using Isolated Scripture Passages as an Authoritative Guide. Despite all the

differences in the cases and the leaders' context, most leaders I interviewed referred to only one

passage of Scripture as the authoritative guide to their responses: Matthew 18:15-17[1], "Have you

met with the person one-on-one and explained what's going on in your life, how you're receiving

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[1]"If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won't accept the church's decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector" (NIV).

their actions or their words, have you started there?" Another leader mentioned, "You

[complainant] actually don't go to the right sources. First of all, go to that individual and

confront, then second of all, if you need to go to the supervisor before talking about the person to

other people." Matthew 18 was referenced as a way to include only the individuals necessary,

"Anytime you can keep the circle as small as it needs to be, I think it is a little bit of what we see

in Matthew 18." One leader expressed that proper process, following Matthew 18, was:

> Talk to your manager. If you can't talk to the manager, then talk to the HR person. HR will
>
> come to me directly and I'll bring them into a room and I'll bring it to a room and I'll assure
>
> you, there will be no repercussions for you.

Going to the individual in question personally was named as an imperative act of courage:

> So I've had multiple staff members who have come in have told me things about the people
>
> whom they're reporting to that this person does this, or this person does this. Then I say, I
>
> would then coach them to say, okay, now what I need you to do, I need you to have the
>
> courage to go and talk to this person first. Go talk to them first. I am this person's boss, but
>
> you go talk to them first.

Some leaders being interviewed spoke with the presupposition that Matthew 18 was a commonly

understood text and that its application was the first step to any conflict. There was a sense that

this passage of Scripture was self-evident and spoke plainly to the issues. Alternatively, other

leaders noted how Matthew 18 seemed to be insufficient in navigating the misuse of power and

may be misapplied in these contexts, "Matthew 18 is not working."

Although every leader recognized the pervasive use of Matthew 18, not one leader

mentioned that it was an effective response. In each experience, leaders noted how this model for

engagement did not bring a complaint to a place of healing or closure.

Limited Women in Leadership: "We are still living in an unequal context"

Another obstacle that influenced response for leaders, receiving a complaint of emotional

harm from a complainant, was the landscape within the MB conference around women in

leadership roles[2]. When I followed a church leader's reflections to ask whether our theological

understanding of women in leadership has impacted this issue, they responded, "The answer is

yes. I think that that is a significant issue and has to be addressed." Most notably, the theological

differences about women in leadership have influenced the number of women who would be

receiving and responding to complaints of emotional harm, "I think what the one thing I would

say as it relates to the gender piece in the MB context is that we are still living in an unequal

context." For one leader, this inconsistency of women in positions of power impacts the care

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[2] The Mennonite Brethren denomination has diverging viewpoints regarding the theological interpretation of women in church leadership. The two alternating views are the Complementarian view and the Egalitarian view. The Complementarian view posits that spiritual authority and leadership is reserved for men. This view believes that men and women were created equal but with distinct roles that are meant to complement one another. Arguments supporting this view include the evidence in the relationship of the Trinity (being distinct but equal), the dominant view of church history and the stability of the social order (Boyd & Eddy, 2009). Alternatively, the Egalitarian view determines biblical authority through gifting rather than gender and sees the cultural realities of the biblical narratives as evidence of fallen nature that God tolerates in order to overturn them (Boyd & Eddy, 2009). This view is supported by reason and experience and the inherent inferiority of women to men displayed in the complementarian position. MB Churches have been tasked with discerning their own teaching and practice of this issue.

given to targets of emotionally harmful behaviour as well as an awareness of the subtle and

nuanced layers of harm, "Putting women in places of power and influence and stuff like that,

that's not consistent yet across the country, because I think it does end up coming into how much

we then care about the victims, particularly if they're women." Having a female perspective was

seen to be valuable because of the ways men might interpret a complaint of emotional harm,

"When you are a female voice in the room, it's kind of like, I think sometimes there's a bit of,

you know, they're driven by emotion."

Not only is a lack of female leadership potentially relevant to how a CCMBC church

leader may respond to a complaint, but one leader also articulated that the absence of female

leadership might influence the environments that can foster and perpetuate harm, "I think the

hurdles there are, again, just that culture, like I hate to use the word like patriarchy. We've just

really legitimized a lot of structures within the church that cultivate situations of abuse." These

structures include, "Putting leaders on pedestals, it would involve things like, protecting

reputations and then also just those things of patriarchal values. Even just the weird things like

not letting genders work together."

While power can be misused between any gender, "You'd have to, you know, be an idiot,

not to notice that generally men are abusing women, not the other way around, again, not

exclusive. I think Christians have to, we have to look at that and be honest about that." The

underrepresentation of women in positions of decision-making was noted to impact policies and

processes that are in place and impact the culture within churches that can exacerbate the issue

and create systemic challenges in the responses to complaints raised.

Motivations for the Church Leader

The obstacles that leaders identified reveal the challenges around the ability to respond effectively to a complaint of emotional harm. While the obstacles remain, leaders identified their motivations to navigate these challenges. Some leaders recognized that both neglecting to respond, and the harmful behaviour itself, negatively impacted staff culture, so they were motivated to address complaints to protect and advance a more positive staff culture. Other leaders were motivated to deal with complaints because they recognized that affected church members were unable to fulfill their roles when they working with the troubling team member. Another leader expressed that fulfilling their pastoral role as a shepherd was a motivator to protect the individuals in their care.

Creating Healthy Staff Culture: "You are actually creating culture in those moments"

When the mission of the church was being obstructed by emotionally harmful individuals or environments, church leaders were motivated to respond because of the ways the wider church culture was being formed or deformed. Processing a complaint of emotional harm is not an isolated concern, "When you're dealing with those things, you're not only dealing with that person or that situation, you are actually creating culture in those moments. The decisions I was making did have an impact on the rest of the staff because it tells them, you know, what is tolerated and what isn't." The culture that is fostered within a church has implications, both for the people who remain, the people attracted to the culture and the people repelled. One church leader, imagining themselves talking to their troublesome team member, said:

So at the end of the day we really appreciate your ministry but the culture that you bring

is not particularly the culture that we are looking for. So by having someone who is toxic,

even though this particular individual brings significant value to the table. At the end of

the day, if there is a toxic culture within the organization, one, you will never attract

players to come to the organization because you will have a reputation of churning

people. And then secondly, you, as a leader will always be viewed as incompetent

because you still have someone who is a jerk to work under and you still have them on

your team, but you haven't dealt with that issue.

Leaders were motivated to effectively respond to a complaint because their actions, and the

absence of action, influenced the culture of the church. The critical role of healthy staff cultures

was highlighted, and how hard culture is to develop, and how easy it can be for culture to be

destroyed. This leader, therefore, was able to estimate that, "The consequences of not dealing

with this situation are bigger than the consequences of dealing with it." Looking at the obstacles

in front of them, leaders who were able to see the negative impacts these behaviours had on their

staff culture, were much more motivated to respond to a complaint.

Allow the Flourishing of People's Gifts: "It weakens the church"

Leaders were motivated to respond to a complaint of emotional harm because the

individual raising the complaint, and presumably others, were unable to effectively exercise their

gifts. Christians understand the church as being a body of believers who actively use their

spiritual gifts to build up the church (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4). A healthy

church body functions only so long as each member is contributing:

It's about my whole purpose and fulfillment and how God has wired me to use my gifts. If my gifts can't be utilized here now, then that saddens me because it actually weakens the community and it weakens the church because now you've got people who actually aren't using their gifts, aren't serving.

In the midst of a truncating dynamic within the leadership team, the full expression of the church is not being realized and the impact and witness of the church is tainted. One leader noted that they had difficulty with clearly identifying and measuring the impact of "safety" on an individual; they found motivation to address the concerns through of the measure of the extent to which others were able to fulfill their giftings:

Obviously, the safety thing is really important, but alongside the safety thing, because that one you can debate back and forth. Okay. Is that really a safety thing? But when suddenly people have lost their purpose and their ability to actually serve the community and now your community is less than, it's weakened because you don't have these people with real gifts who are now not using them in the body.

For this leader, their motivation to respond was more easily generated through the more "objective" observance of people using (or being inhibited from using) their gifts.

Fulfilling their role as Shepherd/Pastor: "There's more to pastoral ministry than just getting the job done"

When one church leader imagined their role of pastor in a community, the images of a shepherd providing guidance and care came to mind:

> I'm a pastor, I'm a shepherd. I am patient. I care for people. You want to be hospitable to people. But then as a boss I also have to follow labour standards. Make sure employees are not harassed and that they are listened to. There's more to pastoral ministry than just getting the job done at the end of the day. It's those who work with you that matter. And so we have to have a very difficult conversation.

This image of a shepherd became a motivation to help this pastor fulfill their role in a certain way. With the image of a shepherd, the care to the "sheep" became inherent:

> There's so much at stake and I think people are precious. The church is called to be a witness to a God who is good and loving and wants people to know him and so we cause immense harm when we sweep things under the rug and don't deal with them appropriately and when we normalize harmful behaviors towards people.

With the church being structured in this way to provide care, one leader expressed the hope of finding other images or metaphors that could motivate a leader to respond effectively to a complaint of emotional harm:

> He won't try to fix it, or excuse it, or any of those things. He will just let people share their experiences and have empathy, and walk through it with them. I think the church should be experts and I think the church should pull in experts

To motivate a leader responding to a complaint of emotional harm, another leader identified, "I think it would be good if we could cast a vision for what a truly Christ centered leader looks like." These leaders recognized that a shared vision of leadership could motivate and support individual leaders in addressing the complexity and uncertainty of concerns.

Supports for the Church Leader

Having introduced the obstacles and the factors that motivate church leaders in spite of these obstacles, the following addresses the supports that leaders relied on to make decisions in the midst of a complaint against a team member's behaviour that the complainant has experienced as emotionally harmful. Such supports included accountability systems they had in place (that provided past and ongoing evaluations), peers who had navigated similar complaints, and reliance on the Holy Spirit and a spiritual consciousness that guided them through uncertainties.

Accountability Systems: "A culture where every employee is getting evaluated"

Leaders articulated varying levels of accountability systems they had in place when complaints were brought to their attention. One leader stated:

> I think if you have a culture where every employee is getting evaluated by a supervisor and I'm getting evaluated by my leadership team, every employee is getting feedback from those that they're overseeing, whether they're volunteers volunteer staff and then every employee is actually performing a self review where they're letting you know how they think they're doing in their job description.

Other leaders spoke to the regrets of not leveraging the systems they had established, "How do you not only have the systems in place, but actually use the systems in a timely way that addresses the issues in the ways that they should be?" Staff plans provided regular accountability, but leaders admitted the lack of timely application or response to unfavourable reports. One leader spoke to the intuition of knowing things were not working out, but there was

a remaining challenge of accountability, "Sometimes it's a matter of trying to figure out what's

the healthiest way to get to the destination where I know this thing is heading." Once he seemed

certain that the pattern of the team member's behaviour was not going to change, he had to

navigate through uncertainty, even with an accountability in place.

Another leader highlighted that staff evaluations cannot only take place when something

is wrong, because this breeds fear around evaluating. Other leaders articulated that it is important

to create systems where reflections are regularly happening and then to use this information to

make decisions when a complaint of harm is made.

Peer Support: "It gives me some kind of solace, that okay, I'm not completely losing my mind"

Church leaders relied on the experience of other peers to offer support and guidance as

they navigated foreign territory in their decision-making. For many leaders, processing a

complaint of emotional harm was something they did not have previous experience with. Feeling

isolated in their decision-making led many to reach out to their community of peers for support

and guidance:

> It became a place where I got some feedback from leaders across the country who didn't
>
> know anything about my situation or my church or any people…Him and I would grab a
>
> supper together…I found in those emotional seasons, those conversations would just kind
>
> of give me my bearings…He would tell me stuff that was going on and some of the
>
> challenges he was having and even hearing him wrestle through his own stuff gave me a
>
> sense of peace.

Leaders who had existing networks of support found this helpful for when a crisis might arise, "I think I tried having a good support network, just in life in general and then that really comes to help in moments of significant conflict or crises." When reaching out to others for support, leaders found a sense of comfort that they were not alone, that they were not the only ones dealing with issues, and that others also found these decisions difficult to make:

> It's been kind of astonishing how difficult the issue is. That even with the best people I can muster, there's still a lot of people that go 'and we have no idea how to move forward.' So, in a, maybe a sick kind of way, it gives me some kind of solace, that okay, I'm not completely losing my mind.

The sense that these moments of decision-making are universally challenging offered support to this leader through the reprieve of peace and solace, as they attempted to make challenging decisions in response to complaints of emotional harm.

Spiritual Consciousness: "It has driven me to more kind of prayer and scripture reflection"

Several leaders named the challenging decision-making demanded of them when a complaint of emotional harm was raised which required attentiveness and discernment from the Holy Spirit. When seeking discernment, a leader can hope for a transcendent support, "Walking with God through a particular conflict. Hey God, what's going on here? What, what do I need to see? What do I need to hear, who do I need to talk to?" The Holy Spirit can speak to leaders through Scripture:

It really doesn't matter what the nature of the conflict is, Scripture has a way of speaking

to me directly. And I believe to those involved in the conflict as a source of wisdom, as a

source of knowledge, as a source of healing and hope and a way forward.

The Holy Spirit can also speak through a communal listening, "I believe the Holy Spirit lives

within us and also among us. And so my common saying is I trust the Spirit of God among us

more than I trust the Spirit of God within me."

Challenging times of discernment compelled leaders to pray in unique ways, "And so the

positive is it has driven me to more kinds of prayer and scripture reflection, drawing on certain

passages of scripture that have been really encouraging in the process in the journey." The

supernatural support of the Holy Spirit guided leaders through decision-making and provided

comfort when navigating complaints.

Gaps

The ways that leaders processed a complaint of emotional harm was diverse but,

unanimously, church leaders identified that there were gaps in how they responded or gaps in the

systems that could support their response. These gaps included the absence of policies in place,

the unavailability of supports to the complainants identifying the harm, the lack of ongoing

professional support and training for church leaders and, lastly, the lack of recognition for a

necessary inner conversion or perspective-taking that could better prepare and support leaders in

their response.

The Absence of Policy

Church leaders noted how critical the process is in response to a complaint of emotional

harm that is raised against a team member, "I'm a firm believer that the process is just as

important, perhaps even more important than the final outcome." One church leader spoke to

how policies relieve leaders from determining validity and how policies remove the subjective

discernment that is complicated by relationship:

> So I think that you need to, I think organizations need policies, because otherwise, you can
>
> get into this like, well, is it legit? Like we're suddenly the ones who are deciding whether
>
> it's legit or not. And then also what you might have is a relationship with the person, it just
>
> gets complicated so it's much easier to be like, this is our policy, this is what we do right
>
> now. We get this formal report and, so I think that there's just logistics of having those
>
> policies in place that, and having them informed by people who actually are trauma
>
> informed, it's important.

This leader highlighted the importance of having policies that leaders can follow to mitigate

against biased approaches and removes the role from the leader of discerning the validity of

harm. In the midst of indecision, another leader-participant expressed how challenging it is to

know what to do next when they are stuck and it appears as though there is nothing more that can

be done:

> And one step is that we are now developing an actual process and policy. What happens
>
> when you get to a point? I think this is a big thing for me. When do you get to the point

where you have to realize, like, we're not, we're no longer able to fix this thing, like

everything we've tried. And so we're at a stalemate, the person that has been hurt or in this

case, the growing list of people that have been hurt, just remain in never, never land. Like

they're getting counseling and whatever, but we're not able to help bring any resolution

because we're stuck.

This leader acknowledged the gap of not having policies established that would be able to

provide a framework for response in the midst of challenging decision-making in response to a

complaint.

***Support for Complainant: "Let people share their experiences and have empathy, and walk
through it with them"***

Upon receiving a complaint of emotional harm from a complainant about a team

member's emotionally harmful behaviour, some church leaders expressed that complainants

need support, but acknowledged there remain gaps in how complainants are cared for. One

leader shared how they try to create safety for individuals to come forward with their concerns,

but noted that the process is not ideal:

And so if the matter comes to me, I'll assure this subordinate that I will make sure that

when I'm talking to your boss, I'll make sure I let them know if I hear that they are now

bullying or intimidating, the person who's reporting to you, then your days here are done.

And I have had to say, to use that language just to make sure that the person who's being

harassed or bullied feels safe. And so slowly people have been coming and sharing back.

Not the ideal protocol. It isn't because I don't want people to tattletale on each other kind of

thing, but I'm trying to figure out how I still have a finger on the pulse of the organization

and exactly what is going on and make sure that subordinate staff are also heard.

This leader recognized that the complainant needs a certain level of protection to come forward

but realized that there are still gaps in how this is done. This need for listening was similarly

expressed by another leader, "I think one of the things I really like to see for churches is learning

how to listen, being able to listen with people present." Another church leader named how the

tendency is for leaders to turn to logistics, but then spoke to the empathetic response that can

provide care for complainants:

> I would love as soon as someone comes forward, let's offer that person counseling and
>
> pay for it or something like that. Like, you know, those kinds of supports to just say, like,
>
> we're not just worried about the logistics here. We're worried about you as a person and
>
> we want to support you.

Leaders named the gaps that are present in supporting complainants through the process of

bringing their experience of emotional harm to light, namely, the ability to listen, provide

counseling, and to embody empathy as complainants share their stories.

***Professional Support and Training: "In seminary, they never teach you management….I have
to stumble my way through"***

The overwhelming response from leaders processing a complaint was that they have not

been prepared for this and that there is a gap in professional support and training, "So in terms of

support, unfortunately, there are none, there are no supports. One of the things that I think in

seminary, they never teach you is management….I have to stumble my way through." Another

leader listed the expansive role of a church leader and the lack of training to fulfill the role:

> I think for many leaders, we get thrown into situations that we're just not prepared for.
> We weren't trained for this. You're supposed to be a vision caster. You're supposed to be
> a good teacher, preacher, you're supposed to be good one-on-one with people,
> relationally. You need to be a strategic planner, understand the budget and know HR stuff
> and how to work with, you know, HR problems and challenges, which is what we're
> talking about in this conversation.

Where education fell short, leaders looked to business professionals for consultation, "I had to

consult some business individuals. From a business perspective, how would you deal with this

situation in this circumstance? So that led me to a path where now I am being mentored by an

individual who mentors CEOs and chairman of fortune 500 companies." One leader-participant

identified that professional training and support can help leaders identify the problem and

respond appropriately:

> I think that one of the challenges is that it's a bit of a new, it's not a new thing, but we
> haven't really been so aware of what emotional and spiritual abuse look like and the impact
> that they can have on victims. At times there are people who have the best intentions who
> would want to help anybody who's been in a situation where they've experienced harm or
> abuse, but hasn't really known how to identify that or provide appropriate supports…I
> think it helps to have an expert say this person isn't weak, this isn't reflecting an inability to

cope on their part. It's actually very normal. We've seen this in a lot of people who've

experienced abuse.

The church leaders interviewed agreed that there is a gap in ongoing training and professional

support for how to process and respond to complaints of emotional harm.

Perspective-taking: "It's just a lack of capacity to put yourself in someone else's shoes,

because they've never worn those shoes"

A few leader-participants expressed the importance of an inner conversion experience,

but how this internal reflection or perspective-taking is missing in many cases. One church

leader reflected, "But for some of us who have been in a privileged space for so long, there's

definitely something to be learned about pain and loss. What does it actually feel like to be in the

victim seat?" Something new was illuminated for this leader that was not always there, a shift in

their internal processing. Another leader reflected:

> So I have power, I have influence. And what it also does is it insulates me from the
>
> experiences of others because when they come to me and I, as I've reflected on different
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> people who have come to me at times with some of these reports of what's going on within
>
> a context, my tendency has been to maybe to minimize it to maybe think that well it'll work
>
> itself out over time.

This leader expressed the insulation that has come from power and influence and identified how

this impacts how they respond with limited understanding. Still another leader expressed how

understanding someone's story requires curiosity, "I need to be way more curious, way more

inquisitive, way more investigative, way more quick to understand somebody else's story and

even way quicker to respond to their story, because what they are experiencing is significant,

real, and hard. And I don't actually understand it." Another church leader spoke to the inner

processing in this way:

> I need to keep asking those questions, but it also reminded me. And, and I guess I was just
>
> thankful that I was actually attentive to what was going on inside of me and just sort of
>
> going okay, if I, if I'm going to be honest, this is what's going on inside of me.

Speaking to the gap of introspection, one leader-participant named the challenge to empathize

with complainants if this internal reflection is absent:

> If you've never felt like you can't have a voice it's hard to imagine what it would be like
>
> to be that person. So then it's hard to empathize and it's hard to really wrap your head
>
> around it. And I think that's largely what we're seeing, it's just a lack of capacity to put
>
> yourself in someone else's shoes, because they've never worn those shoes.

This same leader further expressed the critical role of the inner shift, "The very same process

could either move someone towards healing or harm depending on who's facilitating it and

whether or not they've had that internal shift." The internal reflection can influence the trajectory

of response to a complaint of emotional harm.

Discussion

This research explored the phenomenon of decision-making when a complaint of

emotional harm is made against another team member the church leader oversees, asking the

question: What obstacles, motivations, supports and gaps do church leaders in the Mennonite

Brethren conference in Canada identify when responding to complaints they receive from

someone within their organization about misbehaviour from a team member the leader oversees,

that the complainant considers to be ongoing and emotionally harmful to the complainant or

those they work with? After interviewing various church leaders across the Mennonite Brethren

denomination, it became evident that there are limited pathways and insufficient resources

available to leaders who have a complaint brought to them.

Summary of Findings

Leader-participants expressed a range of obstacles, motivations, supports and gaps, when

responding to a report of emotional harm. Obstacles included the complexity of the problem, the

team leader not being "all bad," the competing priorities and the distinctions of a church context

(relational connection and accountability between church leader and the team member, a lack of

outside resourcing, trying to prevent gossip, using isolated scripture passages as an authoritative

guide, and limited women in leadership) that inhibit response. In spite of the obstacles, church

leaders expressed that creating a healthy church culture, supporting people to flourish in their

giftings and fulfilling the role of shepherd/pastor were motivations to respond effectively. As

leaders sought to respond, they named accountability systems, peer support and spiritual

consciousness as factors that supported them in their decision-making. Lastly, church leaders

unanimously recognized that there are gaps in responding to complaints, some of those gaps

being the absence of policies, lack of support for complainants, no professional support and

training, and the lack of perspective-taking for leaders.

Interpretation of Findings

Church leaders who were interviewed for this research collectively expressed that they did not want emotional harm taking place in their church communities (or anywhere for that matter) but they are still finding it challenging to know how to respond because the problem is so complex and there are no predetermined pathways or policies in place to support their decision-making. The following will discuss what makes this issue important to understand, exploring the ways leaders come to understand and what challenges a curious disposition. Additionally, this discussion will address how policies could support response in the MB denomination and why it is unhelpful to use Matthew 18:15-17 as a guide.

Why is this issue important for leaders to understand?

While some leaders mentioned that they run into this dilemma all the time (someone raising a complaint about another team member's emotionally harmful behaviour) other leaders expressed that they had never come across the dilemma of responding to a complaint of emotional harm. For some leaders this issue is intangible, for others they miss it entirely and, still for others, this issue is pervasive, obvious and all-consuming. This research shows that this issue takes place in churches across the MB denomination, but without understanding the obstacles, motivations, supports and gaps in responding to a complaint of emotional harm, steps will not be taken to resource leaders.

How do leaders come to understand this issue? How a leader comes to understand and verify the details of a complaint of emotional harm is paramount to the decision-making that follows. Therefore, the diligence of a leader's inquiry of the issues is crucial in the trajectory of

the process towards healing/resolution. The following section outlines the range of how a leader comes to understand a complaint.

   Factors that limit a curious response. As a leader comes to understand a complaint that is brought to them, leaders spoke to the multiple factors that limited their curiosity towards the complainant, including, competing priorities, trying to prevent gossip, the relationship between the church leader and the team member, the use of isolated scripture passages as an authoritative guide, and the ways that power can bias a leader.

   Understandably, the ongoing demands that a leader is required to attend to can result in an incurious disposition to the complaint, as the endless demands led multiple leaders to express that they had hoped the issues would just go away. Hoping the relentless pressures would stop made it tempting for leaders to shut down complaints by characterizing them as gossip. In many cases, the possibility that the complainant was gossipping was of more concern to the church leader than the possibility that emotional harm was taking place.

   With competing priorities and the threat of gossip already on a leader's mind, the existing relationship between the church leader and the team member can further limit curiosity as the church leader was predisposed to understand the character of the team member without being open to new information presented by the complainant. This predisposition led church leaders to think, "Is it really that bad?"

   From this incurious estimation of the issue leaders were prone to operate with a level of certainty around the procedural response of deflecting the complainant back to the person who had caused them harm. This leadership response of certainty leverages Matthew 18:15-17 as a

template for reconciliation that requires the person afflicted to speak to the harmer and then if

that is unsuccessful, to bring another person along (discussed further below). The lack of

curiosity from a leader can lead to an estimation that if a leader has not encountered the

behaviours or attitudes reported, then to their own estimation, the complaint is unfounded.

     Is the complaint just a misinterpretation of intent? In many cases a church leader was

more open and curious to the team member (who has a complaint against them) than they were

to the complainant, who in some cases was responded to with the notion that they were simply

misinterpreting the behaviours of the team member. Multiple leaders mentioned the tendency

they have to emphasize that the team member did not mean to cause harm. It can be tempting for

leaders to explain away misbehaviour as a misunderstanding, and to believe that if the

complainant better understood the good intentions, then the complaint would be unsubstantiated.

Leaders succumbing to this assessment neglected to measure and account for the impact of the

actions, which should be emphasized over and above intent. Workplace practice and precedence

is clear that the intent of someone abusing their power is not a major consideration, but rather

gives priority to the impact of behaviour on the complainant. It has been widely recognized that

not all emotional harm is perpetrated knowingly or intentionally and that it is often the case that

the accused are unaware or confused by the accusation (Oakley & Humphreys, 2019). Mullen

(2020) explains the common temptation for communities to believe someone who denies their

behaviour was motivated by evil, "People are quick to excuse someone who unknowingly or

without malice causes harm" (p. 108). People can have good intentions and mean well, and still

cause harm.

How is power a factor of understanding the complaint? One leader acknowledged that their position of power over the team member being accused of causing harm resulted in them not experiencing the same behaviours that the complainant was raising concerns about. It can be challenging for people in positions of power to make decisions about experiences of power imbalance or misuse that they themselves have never experienced. Power is inevitable in systems and is necessary, but what is significant is how power is understood and leveraged. Power can create blind spots for church leaders who are responding to a complaint, where curiosity can support leaders in overcoming the biases that power can influence. Mullen (2020) articulated the responsibility of the leader in this way, "Once an organization assumes the responsibility that comes with being in charge, they assume the obligation to make sure they are adequately equipped to exercise their authority" (p. 109).

Leaders discerning the complaint as a threat to themselves, their team-member, or their church. When a complaint of emotional harm was brought forward, church leaders acknowledged that the complaint could be perceived as a threat to something they cared about, which could impact their responses (see Appendix B). They wondered about how this complaint would personally threaten them – What does this complaint say about my leadership? What systems have I created and reinforced where harm has emerged? Leaders wondered about the practical threats – How will processing this complaint impact my authority and oversight in the church? How will the exposure of harm reflect on my position in leadership? Others considered the complaint as a kind of relational threat – How could my direct report cause harm when I understand them to be a competent and kind leader? How could the complainant bring forward

this concern, knowing that will disrupt the status quo? If a leader understood the complaint as a

threat, they may have chosen to defend rather than respond more constructively. Leaders can

become paralyzed in the absence of clear pathways forward and exhibit freezing behaviours.

Some leaders reflected on the hope that the issue would work itself out or go away over time, "I

was always hopeful that, you know, there'd be a change of heart and expectations and things will

start clicking and working again, but I'd seen the same pattern for long enough that I knew that

the pattern wasn't going to change." Some leaders found themselves freezing because they

believed that when they begin a process of response that there could be no turning back.

> Another conflict response is the act of fawning that seeks to appease the parties involved:
> Obviously the goal is being reconciled in relationships, but sometimes there's layers that
> make that unable to happen. Right, so I have a hard time just being okay with that, which
> causes me to either overcompensate, by pleasing people or take more responsibility than I
> need to, to make the situation right.

Alternatively, leaders may elicit a fight response and respond with arrogance or certainty. One

leader articulated how this response can be harmful:

> Because if you have a team that's in place to provide accountability that has a policy and
> they follow it, but their tone, when they sit down with somebody, reporting abuse is
> arrogant, if it's causing harm…the victim who's already going to be struggling, as they
> come forward is made to feel more uncomfortable by that first encounter with the person
> that they're reporting to. I mean, it doesn't matter what policy you have. You've already

perpetuated the trauma. And I think that that's kind of the bigger hurdle is working on the

culture to catch up to the policy.

If a leader experiences the complaint or complainant as potentially threatening in some way, they

can reactively respond in ways that cause further harm; their own conflict behaviours of fight,

flight, freeze or fawn can influence their attention to process and exacerbate the harm to the

complainant. Although it is an understandable response for a leader to feel a sense of threat when

a complaint is raised, the challenge for leaders is how they can move from a truncated, rash

response, towards an expansive and conscientious engagement in the issues.

How could policies better support leaders within the MB conference?

One of the church leaders I spoke with identified an explicit policy or process they

implemented to support their decision-making. Only two leaders mentioned policy more

generally, where one noted the importance of their existing policies and the second noted that

they are beginning to create one in the aftermath of processing a difficult case of emotional

harm. Oakley and Humphreys (2019) note that much of the deficient or ill-informed response to

disclosures or complaints is due to the limited policy and procedure in this area of emotional

harm. That was evidenced in this research where each leader was left to individually discern the

way forward coupled with the additional challenges present, notably, the competing priorities a

leader might be juggling, and the relational dynamics that challenge accountability between

church leader and team member.

Interviewing leaders across the MB denomination exposed a gap in the support that could

be available to church leaders within the Canadian Conference of MB Churches. The MB

conference works in partnership with each provincial conference to resource churches, "to cultivate a community and culture of healthy disciple-making churches and ministries, faithfully joining Jesus in his mission" (CCMBC, 2018). In 2021, the MB conference published the Collaborative Unified Strategic Plan (CUSP) serving as a road map to fulfill its organizational mission, and to clarify the priorities of where human and financial resources will be allocated. To cultivate healthy, disciple-making churches, the CCMBC developed four strategic priorities: spiritual health and theology, leadership development, mission and organizational health. Within organizational health, two key deliverables were to "Develop shared resource libraries for HR, administration, etc." and "Develop and promote shared systems, technologies, best practices among churches" (The CUSP, 2021). Collaboratively working towards a policy across the CCMBC for church leaders responding to complaints of emotional harm would contribute to both deliverables.

What is wrong with using Matthew 18:15-17 as a guide to response?

In the absence of an established policy, leader-participants were left to their own decision-making which made them vulnerable to relying on isolated Scriptural passages as their guide to policy. This was evident in the overwhelming application of Matthew 18:15-17 where church leaders unanimously regarded this text as appropriate guidance, but did not speak to its effectiveness with the same enthusiasm. Leaders considering the process following a complaint would do well to caution, if not altogether abandon, the use of Matthew 18.

The original context speaks to circumstances of mutuality and does not address issues where there is a power differential (Reeves, 2017). The pursuit of Matthew 18:15-17 is to

recover those who are lost but through the exposure of their sin. Jesus speaks to brothers and

sisters, so he is not speaking about an hierarchical relationship. The passage is specifically

speaking to situations requiring *mutual* care, "Jesus put the mutual care for one another in

familial terms, a recovery society among equals, children treating one another like children"

(Reeves, 2017, p. 363). A serious consideration in complaints of emotional harm is the power

imbalance present between the complainant and the team member:

> This model, based on Matthew 18, may work in cases where the people in dispute have
>
> equal amounts of power. In relationships that are abusive, there is a power imbalance,
>
> and the person who has been abused can NEVER "just" come and talk. There will always
>
> be fear involved (MCC Abuse Response & Prevention, 2022).

Without recognizing the dynamics of power, the misapplication of Matthew 18 can cause re-

traumatization for those harmed when they are required to confront the individual who has

harmed them one-on-one. When someone on the leadership team has abused their power and a

complaint has been brought to their leader, the accountability then lies with the person

overseeing the team member. The assumption that the complainant must first exhaust the

Matthew 18 process, by going to the individual, then bringing others, then the broader church, is

a gross misunderstanding of the contextual realities and application of the text. Oakley and

Humphreys (2019) acknowledge that this passage can be healthy and helpful, but only in

relationships that are not abusing power and causing emotional harm.

The use of Matthew 18:15-17 can also lead to a dismissal of the complaint when a team

member accused of wrongdoing uses Matthew 18 to avoid accountability. To distract the process

away from their conviction, people being held accountable can claim that 'Scripture has not been fulfilled,' and therefore, argue that the complaint should be dismissed. This response results in Matthew 18 being used as a scapegoat from disciplinary measures, when in reality, Matthew 18 should have never been initially followed. Criticizing the way a complainant has operated in bringing the truth to light can be a tactic to control the narrative within toxic cultures. McKnight and Barringer (2020) believe that Scripture can too often be used to protect the accused rather than caring for the victim, "The wounded were retraumatized by church leaders who responded with biblical law instead of grace, mercy and discernment" (p. 51). Universally applying Matthew 18:15-17 without discernment can cause further harm to complainants, rather than providing the solace and healing processes that are intended and needed.

It is appropriate that church leaders making decisions surrounding a complaint of emotional harm would want to rely on the authority of Scripture to guide a path forward. What is troubling in the use of these verses is that they are taken out of the context from which they were originally spoken that distorts meaning and application. In addition, Scripture should never detract attention away from *what happened* by focusing on how an allegation was brought into the light (McKnight & Barringer, 2020). It is a sobering reality that individuals raising concerns can be admonished for the ways in which they addressed the harm, rather than attending to the harm that is spoken of. Complaints of emotional harm require an approach that considers the complexity and the nuance warranted, rather than trying to filter the concerns through short passages of Scripture that have been taken out of context to prove a specific predetermined point.

Leaders should broaden the scope of Scripture applied and look to a more holistic application of the Bible and the gospel message to concerns that are brought forward.

The automatic application of Matthew 18 for all matters of behavioural concern should be seriously cautioned. The saying proves true that, "When you only have a hammer, you see every problem as a nail." It seems that church leaders need a greater diversity of tools to approach the complexities that arise when a complaint of emotional harm is brought to their attention.

Conclusion

Through this research I asked, "What obstacles, motivations, supports and gaps do church leaders in the Mennonite Brethren conference in Canada identify when responding to complaints they receive from someone within their organization about misbehaviour from a team member the leader oversees, that the complainant considers to be ongoing and emotionally harmful to the complainant or those they work with?" Using the Insight approach to explore the interior decision-making of church leaders, it was quickly identified that there is a need for more clarity surrounding the problem of emotional harm and more deliberation around the options available to leaders faced with these decisions. Exploring the obstacles, motivations, supports and gaps leaders face, I proposed that church leaders are the point of leverage for systemic change in how the MB conference responds to complaints of emotional harm about a team member the leader oversees.

Church leaders described the complexity of the problem, their competing priorities and specific church contextual realities as obstacles that challenged their response. The complicated

nature of the problem made it challenging to respond to, especially with the team member being viewed as "not that bad." With the myriad of other priorities a church leader faced, responding effectively to a complaint was additionally challenging within a church context: relationship between a church leader and their team member complicated accountability; church leaders rarely sourced external support; leaders were wary about complaints being considered gossip; isolated scripture passages were used as a guide to response, and the limited presence of women in leadership has an influence on how complaints and complainants are treated.

While these factors clearly present obstacles to church leaders who are tasked with responding to a complaint of emotional harm, leaders were motivated to make decisions that would create and sustain a healthy staff culture; they were motivated to make decisions that would allow people to flourish in the use of their gifts, and finally, they were motivated to make decisions that fulfilled their role as a shepherd/pastor.

Making these complicated decisions, leaders were supported by the accountability systems they had in place, by the peers they could reach out to, and by a spiritual consciousness that carried them.

There remains to be gaps that the leaders identified when responding to complaints of emotional harm about a team member the church leader oversees. Leaders expressed a need for policies that can support response, support for the complainant, professional support and training, in addition to, an inner conversion of church leaders that informs how a leader operates in their decision-making.

Leaders who are informed on the impacts of emotional harm, with the ability to identify the problem and navigate next steps, can have powerful influence on situational cases and mitigating further perpetuation of harm. Interviewing church leaders across the MB denomination who have been in a position of decision-making and have processed these complaints illuminated an experience that was nuanced, complex, and humbling for the leaders, which they described with vulnerability. This research is valuable because it has illuminated the problem of emotional harm, it has named the possible factors a leader will encounter when navigating future complaints and it suggests what a leader should consider when deciding how to respond to a complaint of this nature. I also hoped that doing this research would probe the system by curiously wondering alongside MB church leaders to diagnose concerns, illuminate gaps and propose more conscientious responses to complaints of emotional harm.

Implications

This research suggests that church leaders within the MB conference are not equipped to respond effectively to complaints of emotional harm. It is recommended that church leaders invest in the training and development of skills to effectively process complaints. The need for additional training was evident throughout interviews as leaders expressed concerns around the limitations of biblical training and the lack of management education for many church leaders. The expectations placed on pastors seems to be ever increasing; where expectations were at one time caring for people and delivering a sermon has now expanded beyond, to managing a budget, managing staff, overseeing building renovations, casting vision for the future, overseeing ministries, missions work, accountability structures, and more. Church leaders need additional

and ongoing training on issues of emotional harm, how to spot it, how to recognize patterns and how to process complaints that includes recognizing their own limitations and utilizing external support.

Future Research

More research is needed to heighten the conversations around the presence of emotional harm within churches, in addition to the development of specific policies that can address how church leaders can respond to cases of emotional harm within a church context. The majority of research on emotional harm is specific to secular work contexts, and research specific to a church context overwhelmingly studies cases of sexual and physical harm within domestic settings (where the research speaks to how churches can intervene and support). Policies that can specifically address emotional harm could serve to provide a clear, predetermined process for church leaders that is objective.

More research is needed to explore the cultures created within churches that can foster harmful behaviours and how leaders can instigate processes and a culture that mitigates against emotional harm. Normalizing the reality that every leader is capable of causing harm, regardless of their intentions, would elevate the significance of self-awareness, self-reflection and accountability processes for all leaders.

Greater research is needed in exploring the pervasiveness of this issue within anabaptist, evangelical or non-profit settings that can support and normalize the measures that may be required in acting upon complaints of harmful behaviour.

Limitations and Strengths

This study is strengthened by the timeliness of this issue and the unique attributes of myself as a researcher. In the current postmodern and post Christendom landscape, the efficacy of long-standing religiosity is being questioned and people are rethinking methods and practices. Churches are not exempt from this, and many are grasping for legitimacy and gripping their power as these patterns are changing. The accounts of leadership team members abusing or misusing their power is ever increasing, making it imperative that leaders in positions of decision-making are equipped and supported to process complaints of emotional harm. McKnight and Barringer (2020) acknowledge the pervasive reality of abuse in churches and declare that the overdue purging of abusive church leaders and perpetuating systems has begun. Church leaders have an opportunity to show empathy in the face of reports and to redeem narratives of harm.

Secondly, this research is strengthened by the unique perspective that I offer as a researcher. As a leader in the church, I am motivated to change the systemic patterns of harm that can perpetuate in the absence of informed decision-making. I have been saturated in the context of faith, church, Christian religiosity and scripture from an early age and have since studied Biblical education and, now am a Pastor in the same context I have studied. This perspective strengthened my ability to wonder alongside participants more effectively in their own terms and their roles and responsibilities were within my scope of understanding. The shared language and church culture strengthened my ability to ask questions that were relevant to their context and fostered a particular kind of conversation that other researchers may not have been able to access. I navigated this research both motivated and marked with compassion for the

complexities and challenges leaders have when they are responsible for processing complaints of emotional harm.

The limitations of this study included the challenges of recruiting when the awareness of the issues surrounding emotional harm, and the realities of this type of harm, is limited. The nature of emotional harm and the ability to identify symptoms is still vastly under-recognized amongst church leaders. This created obstacles to recruiting and accessing a breadth of church leaders who have navigated decision-making through a complaint of emotional harm. While there may be many leaders who have had informal complaints of emotional harm presented to them, the overwhelming majority would not characterize the complaint through the impact on the complainant.

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Appendix A: The Loop

In addition to the data of sense that is exterior to us, Insight invites us to pay attention to the cognitional data of our interiority. Jamie Price (2018) identifies these cognitive operations as a model he calls the Loop. The Loop outlines the sequential and cumulative operations of how we come to know, value and decide (M. Price, 2016). As we experience the world around us our mind spontaneously seeks understanding by asking "What is it?" This flows to a process of verification that asks "Is it so?" This makes up the lower loop of reflection which is followed by the operation of valuing that transitions into the existential upper loop where meaning is generated. Valuing asks the pivotal question "So what?" It is in valuing that significance is determined and sets a trajectory for action and the likely future. Valuing is followed by the deliberation of options "What can I do?" The evaluation of those options "What should I do?" and finally, the preceding evaluations lead to a decision to act, "Will I do it?"

Each of these cognitive operations can be performed on a range from truncated to more mindful. Upon an initial experience, understanding can range from curious to incurious, verification ranging from critical to hasty, valuing from discerning to reactive, deliberating from imaginative to limited, evaluating from conscientious to rash and valuing from free to constrained (J. Price, 2017). Targeting our curiosity towards our interiority allows us empirical understanding of our consciousness, providing the opportunity to move towards expansive decision-making that limits defend-attack patterns that can generate and escalate conflict.

Appendix B: Conflict According to Insight

The Insight approach provides a framework for understanding the interior dynamics of conflict that manifest as external conflict behaviours: fight, flight, freeze, fawn. These behaviours, according to the Insight approach, are decisions to defend based on a perception of threat. A perceived threat is understood as an aversive gap between expectation and behaviour. These gaps can be categorized as personal (image of self), practical (how one's life functions), social/relational (how others perform their roles) or systemic (pattern of cooperation) (J. Price, 2017, Jull 2022). Having the ability to understand and target what triggered the apprehension of threat can break a conflict down into manageable parts.

This research observes that the threats or gaps a church leader may perceive can impact their subsequent response. In receiving a complaint, a leader may discern several threats or gaps. The leader may feel a threat to her sense of self in the performance of her role; she may be concerned about how she has demonstrated her leadership in a way that has allowed for harm to take place. Practically, a leader may wonder about how this complaint will conflict with his ongoing demanding tasks and responsibilities. A leader may experience a complaint to be signaling a relational threat that has violated the expected norms of an individual to maintain harmony that does not detract from the mission of the church. More expansively, the role of the church leader, as someone who upholds justice carries the responsibility of holding staff accountable for their actions, may lead to a deliberation that is more protective, curious and thorough. In many cases, multiple threats are simultaneously present and overlap to create a complexity in corresponding to the undesirable futures that are imagined.

Appendix C: Key Insight Terms

What Insight as Method offers my Research: Insight Terms

I used these Insight concepts in the framing of my investigation; they shaped my questions, the way I conducted the interviews and discerned significance in the data. I needed to understand the social dimensions of leaders' decision-making (what Insight calls carriers); how their decision-making was influenced by their sense of the role and its scope (which Insight calls horizon of concern) and the various meanings attributed to their decisions (narrative images).

Carriers of Consciousness

As a reflexive researcher, hoping to heighten the reflexivity of my research participants, it was important to identify the carriers that shaped cognitive performance (for myself and the church leaders). Carriers of consciousness are implicitly present in every social interaction, including, "situations, environments, roles, cultures, tools, expectations, relationships, models, frameworks, systems" (M. Price, 2020). Carriers are shaped by the spaces of encounter we are situated within, and by identifying them, we can consider what other affordances are available (Jull, 2022).

In this research, there were several social carriers that were most relevant to understanding the phenomenon of leadership decision-making, including: role, horizon of concern, narrative images, and presence to Spirit. Noticing these implicit drivers of performance allowed for a more precise evaluation of what was most important to church leaders and how this influenced their decisions.

Roles

Roles situate us in relation to those around us and determine our concerns and tasks (Jull, 2020). The roles individuals inhabit are both ordered by the rules and norms that govern within contexts, and they are dynamic as they are influenced by independent individuals making decisions within the system (Jull, 2020). People acting together within their various roles produce a pattern of cooperation, that is either accomplishing the intended good or not. When the intended good is not being fulfilled, this reveals a structural gap in performance. Leaders acting within a system can first identify what is being produced, discern if it is recurring, and then explore the patterns of cooperation that are sustaining what is being produced (and whether it is achieving the intended good) (M. Price, 2020).

Most prominent in a church leader's decision-making is the role that carries their consciousness, by focusing their attention on specific expectations, responsibilities and environmental concerns. The role of a church leader is ordered by the expectations and guidelines predetermined through a church's governance structure and biblical foundations. The dynamic realities of a leadership role is influenced by the staff and congregation members who act within this system. A complainant raising a concern to a church leader heightens the leader's attention to a perceived gap in performance by the team member. This gap exists between the expectations the complainant has for the role fulfilled by the team member and the exhibited behaviours that generate a relational threat. The response and actions taken by the church leader can generate further threats and gaps in performance. When asking, "What is being produced?" a complainant is identifying emotional harm resulting from the recurring patterns of behaviour of the team member. This is where discernment is critical in identifying the patterns of cooperation

that are sustaining this harm and to identify the shifts social actors can make to these

interactions. Systemic patterns are powered and sustained by the individuals acting within their

roles. Therefore, when a church leader is able to pay attention to the role they fulfill, it can

position them to better address the concerns that are being raised within the system (Jull, 2020).

Horizon of Concern

Each role comes with a particular horizon of concern that narrows the scope of what an

individual should pay attention to. Roles are animated by the horizons of concern that focus the

attention of leaders to particular issues, as the role inhabited sets the range of relevant questions

(J. Price, forthcoming 2023). When facing an undesirable gap within a system, a church leader

can seek to understand their role and the horizon of concern they may be subconsciously

attentive to. Realigning with the primary horizon of concern can open up new possibilities for a

leader, but alternatively, "When we become forgetful of ourselves in our roles- and we identify

ourselves so closely with the tasks and concerns of our roles, we tend to hold on very tightly to

the way we do things" (J. Price, forthcoming 2023, p. 118).

Pastors are people within roles and fulfilling the role of pastor engages a particular

horizon of concern. Among other tasks the scope of these concerns involves preaching and

teaching content, congregational care, disciplinary actions, budget, staff oversight, and defining

and communicating a church's vision, mission, and values. In a church leaders' performance of

these activities it can be presumed they aspire to inspire through their teaching, embody empathy

through their congregational care, provide integral accountability, manage an honourable and

transparent budget, and lead towards a clear mission and vision. Complaints of emotional harm

are relevant to a leader's horizon of concern as they speak to staff oversight, disciplinary actions and congregational care.

Additionally notable is the power that is operative in what a church leader determines is significant, as well as how they perform within their determined horizon of concern. The Insight approach advances that power is, "the capacity to influence others' knowing, valuing and deciding" (Jull, 2020, p. 265). With this influence, a leader can direct specific attention to what they have deemed is most relevant once a complaint is raised. In addition to *what* they use their power to focus on, *how* a leader performs can be observed. Leaders yielding their power can choose to operate expansively through curiously coming to know, value and make decisions, or they can coercively leverage their power towards constrained outcomes and biased conclusions that fail to ask the relevant questions. The processes that a leader instigates to move through the complaint may be in the best interest of the long-term sustainable health of their church, while proving to be largely inconvenient and uncomfortable.

The way a leader utilizes power to address their horizon of concern can significantly influence the outcome of the complaint. For example, a complaint may be understood through incurious questioning and a hasty verification that the complainant is bitter and resentful towards the individual in question. This may lead to an elemental valuing of significance that minimizes the complainant as a disgruntled employee seeking revenge. Alternatively, a more expansive, curious questioning may explore what has transpired in the relationship that has led to the raising of a concern. What are the hopes of the complainant and how do they see themselves functioning within their predetermined role to justify the concern? What is at stake for the complainant that

led them to risk their reputation and the repercussions that could follow their complaint? These examples provide two stark trajectories for the complainant, the organization, and the leader, when using power to make decisions that are either constrained or conscientiously knowing, valuing and deciding. The horizon of concern for a leader operating within their role, and their conscious performance within that role, is influenced further by the model or image carrying the aspirations or, opposingly, the limited actions.

Narrative Image

Narrative images act as carriers of consciousness, framed within a specific role, and relative to the horizon of concern. There is a link between a narrative image and how someone performs in their role (J. Price, forthcoming 2023). Jamie Price (forthcoming 2023) further explains, "To understand what's constraining an individual you need to pay attention to the narrative image that's carrying her performance" (p. 146). The narrative images associated with roles can orient individuals to a more expansive or constrained performance in their role. For example, a bricklayer may perform their role oriented by the different narrative images of "wall-constructor" or "cathedral contributor."

This study has framed the actors as "church leader" (receiving and responsible for processing complaints), "team member" (person complaint is centered around), and "complainant" (person raising concern). Each of these descriptors impose a narrative image that carries one's consciousness in the fulfillment of the role, the horizon of concern they attend to, and the performance of their decision-making. At the outset of this study various narrative images acted as placeholders to differentiate the players and illuminate the problem. Ongoing

conversations took place within my thesis committee to deliberate which identifiers were accurate and to deliberate how each narrative image carried the consciousness of the reader.

The first identifier was the role of "church leader" used to identify the decision-maker. Our curiosity led us to wonder how a narrative image could encompass the full spectrum of responsibilities and expectations present when a complaint is raised? The role of a leader making a decision is accountable to the outcomes related to the organization, the accountability of the team member, the care for the complainant, the holder of the process, and the future patterns of interaction. Biblical descriptors include apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, teacher (Eph., 4:11), none of which encompass the full nature of responsibility in the midst of a complaint. Organizationally, CEO, president, supervisor, manager, director, or team lead, are insufficient to carry the meaning generated within a church context that emphasizes relationship and interconnectivity. When processing a complaint of emotional harm a leader will navigate multiple roles, including the role of determining process and listening and understanding the components of the complaint. To understand what might be constraining a church leader operating within their role, careful attention should be given to the narrative image carrying their performance.

The "team member" was originally identified as "subordinate" to situate this individual in relation to the church leader. While "subordinate" identifies the position of the individual, the term carries a negative connotation and fails to narrate the relationship with the complainant. Descriptors of petty tyrant (Ashforth, 1994), the foolish (Cloud, 2013), the diminisher (Wiseman, 2010), the narcissist (DeGroat, 2020) and the asshole (Sutton, 2007), cover the spectrum of

behaviours that can be exhibited, but each term fails to recognize those who have good intentions and unknowingly cause harm. A neutral term that identifies the role of this individual within the context of a complaint is "team member."

Finally, the narrative image of "complainant" describes the actions of the individual being harmed, but this identification may elicit images of a troublemaker and a disruptive agent to the status quo. In the same way that "victim" carries an understanding drastically different from that of "survivor," more expansively identifying this role is critical to shaping patterns of interaction. The virtues of a "whistleblower" encompass a commitment to the truth and a high value for integrity, but synonyms for whistleblower are commonly: snitch, nark, informant or betrayer. This narrative image does not fully encompass the role that a complainant plays in a system perpetuating harmful behaviours. Ongoing discernment is needed to imagine a more expansive narrative image that identifies an individual speaking truth, risking their reputation, and the advocating of justice. For the purposes of this research, "complainant" will remain the identifying term, while recognizing the limitations to how this term carries one's consciousness.

A system that is truncated by individuals performing their roles in limited ways requires the introduction of positive change. Narrative images can expand conscious performance by orienting leaders to greater aspirations in the fulfillment of their role. Additionally, a system can be positively changed by releasing, "the spiritual capacity of persons within their roles" (J. Price, forthcoming 2023, p. 144).

Appendix D: Informed Consent for Church Leaders

When a subordinate misbehaves: Church leaders' dilemmas in responding to complaints

about a subordinate's emotionally harmful behaviours

Introduction

My name is Jodi Enns, and you are invited to participate in my research project, *When a*
subordinate misbehaves: Church leaders' dilemmas in responding to complaints about a
subordinate's emotionally harmful behaviours. I am a master's student in the School of
Humanitarian Studies at Royal Roads University.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how church leaders within the Mennonite Brethren
denomination in Canada respond to complaints surrounding disrespectful or emotionally harmful
behaviour by a subordinate to others within the organization. Semi-structured interviews will
explore the dilemmas and decisions that church leaders face in the context of complex and
competing information and relationships. The interviews will focus on church leaders'
experiences to support reflection on the dilemmas involved in receiving a complaint, additional
options for action, and current and potential supports to prepare other leaders to respond
effectively to complaints in a way that can strengthen the organization and the individuals within
it.

The project is not funded or sponsored. You may verify the authenticity of this project by
contacting my project supervisor Marnie Jull (marnie.jull@royalroads.ca).

Nature of participation

Your participation will consist of an interview and your involvement is foreseen to last approximately ninety minutes. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a church leader who has received a formal or informal complaint about a subordinate's emotionally harmful behaviour within your organization. Questions will explore your decision-making through the complaint experience, the dilemmas you may have faced, the options you considered, your reflections on the effectiveness of your response, and your ideas on what might prepare future leaders to respond to complaints in a way that could strengthen the organization and the individuals within it.

Any foreseeable harms and benefits

This study includes minimal risk because the nature of the role of a church leader includes the supervision and management of the behaviour of subordinates as part of their regular duties. While the reflection on past difficulties may be troubling, the harm is no greater than that which you might encounter as part of your regular professional life.

Benefits for participants may include the opportunity to process, reflect and learn from their past experiences. The longer-term benefits would be to support other leaders to respond to complaints within a faith-based organization. To mitigate risk, participants will have the option to review my summary of the interview for accuracy.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time. Participants will be thanked for their involvement with a $15 gift card.

Recording and information distribution

Interviews will be recorded digitally and summarized, in anonymous format, in the final report. Comments will remain anonymous, unless the participant agrees to be identified. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential. The data gathered will be retained for research purposes only and stored digitally. Raw video data will be archived in a password protected folder, kept for the duration of the research for verification purposes, and destroyed upon thesis submission. Data will not be retained pertaining to an individual who has withdrawn at any time. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time until the submission of the final thesis. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence.

In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Masters in Conflict Analysis & Management, I will also be sharing my research findings with the National Faith and Life Team (NFLT) within the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (CCMBC).

The research results will be published in public outlets, including RRU's Digital Archive, Pro-Quest and Library and Archives Canada. The results might also be disseminated through an article, or at public and academic conferences and presentations. Participants will be sent a copy of results.

This research project has been approved by the RRU Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethicalreview@royalroads.ca; 1-250-391-2600 ext. 4425.

By signing this letter, you are indicating your agreement to participate in this project. In doing so, you are not waiving any legal rights.

Name: (Please Print): _____

Mailing address and email (for gift): _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E: Interview Schedule

Date:	Participant:	Length of Interview	Experience with Dilemma
September 3, 2021	A	1 hour 23 minutes	Yes
September 17, 2021	A	1 hour 22 minutes	Yes
October 12, 2021	A	1 hour 25 minutes	Yes
November 2, 2021	B	52 minutes	No
November 11, 2021	C	1 hour 15 minutes	Yes
November 26, 2021	D (data not used)	1 hour 9 minutes	Yes
November 30, 2021	C	1 hour 9 minutes	Yes

December 6, 2021	E	unknown	No
December 21, 2021	F	1 hour 22 minutes	Yes
January 14, 2022	F	1 hour 55 minutes	Yes
February 9, 2022	G	46 minutes	No
February 17, 2022	H	1 hour	Yes
February 18, 2022	I	58 minutes	No
March 8, 2022	J	1 hour 7 minutes	No
April 8, 2022	A	1 hour 51 minutes	Yes

Appendix F: Letter of Recruitment (Church Leaders)

When a subordinate misbehaves: Church leaders' dilemmas in responding to complaints

about a subordinate's emotionally harmful behaviours

Hello,

My name is Jodi Enns and I serve on staff at Forest Grove Community Church in Saskatoon. I am currently pursuing my Masters in Conflict Analysis and Management through Royal Roads University. **Through this program, I am completing a thesis seeking to understand the decision-making of a leader in responding to complaints about the emotionally harmful behaviour exhibited by a subordinate within the organization.**

To explore this phenomenon, I am hoping to interview church leaders (those in positions of authority or decision making over others within their ministry) through an informal dialogue with loosely structured questions. The focus will be on the reflections of the church leader, where uncertainty and complexity can be acknowledged and explored (you are not required to be the "expert" or have all the answers). Specifically, I am hoping to interview church leaders who have received a complaint (formal or informal) surrounding the behaviour of a subordinate in the organization whose behaviour has caused significant harm to others within the organization.

Please see below for a summary of the proposed research and the research questions that will be explored.

Guiding question:

What current and potential supports or resources do church leaders in the Mennonite Brethren conference in Canada think they need to effectively respond to complaints they receive

from someone within their organization about a subordinate of the church leader. Specifically,

where the complaint is outlining behaviour that the complainant considers to be ongoing and

emotionally harmful?

Sub Questions:

What are the challenges and dilemmas that church leaders in the Mennonite Brethren face

when they receive these (informal or formal) complaints? What are the available options, and

which have been effective or ineffective in their estimation? What would help them to perform

better if anything?

Any foreseeable harms and benefits

I recognize this information may be highly sensitive in nature. The following measures

will be taken to maintain confidentiality and anonymity:

- This study is of minimal risk because the nature of the role of a church leader

    includes the supervision and management of the behaviour of subordinates as part of

    their regular duties. While the reflection on past difficulties may be troubling, the

    harm is no greater than that which you might encounter as part of your regular

    professional life.

- Benefits for participants may include the opportunity to process, reflect and learn

    from their past experiences. The longer-term benefits would be to support other

    leaders to respond to complaints within a faith-based organization.

- To mitigate risk, participants will have the option to review my summary of the

    interview for accuracy. Participants will be encouraged to use pseudonyms, or first

initials of the parties involved to protect anonymity and any identifying details will be changed upon reporting.

- Video recordings will be collected for the transcription and analysis pertaining to research. Video recordings and transcriptions will be saved in password protected space and videos will be destroyed upon completion of thesis.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jodi