

**EO Files (July 2018)**

**“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET – Reflections in Brief”**

**Silenced in God’s name: sexual harassment at Hong Kong churches must be stopped**

Recently, the Hong Kong Christian Council unearthed an inconvenient truth with a study on sexual harassment in Hong Kong churches: more than half of the 55 respondents have been sexually harassed or assaulted by a church leader or employee; near one-fifth were forced to engage in sexual activity. The appalling findings fueled an already simmering outcry over unchecked sexual aggression in God’s backyard, following recent media reports of sexual misdemeanors committed by senior pastors against both female and male churchgoers.

The public’s outrage is hardly surprising. After all, violation of a person’s bodily autonomy – which underlies all acts of sexual assault and harassment – flies in the face of everything religion supposedly represents: be it a moral compass, a shelter of love, or a champion for justice. But however lofty the doctrines they preach, churches are, first and foremost, human-run institutions. As such, they are never infallible and always infused with power relations. And when victims of sexual harassment are being silenced, evidently power is being abused and the church is failing to practise what it preaches.

Indeed, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) is deeply concerned by the prevalence of sexual harassment in local churches as well as the way it has been handled behind closed doors. More and more stories have surfaced where members of the congregation or church management reportedly brushed off complaints from victims and demanded silence and forgiveness, adding another layer of shame and despair to a traumatic, humiliating experience.

In fact, over 90% of victims of sexual harassment across all sectors do not seek help, according to the EOC’s past surveys. Often times, sexual harassers are well-respected authority figures and the victims, inured to the asymmetrical power dynamic, feel that they have no choice but to stay silent. Church cultures, in particular, tend to operate along strict hierarchies while calling on followers to be loving, understanding and forgiving. Add to this all the taboo, conservatism and negativity surrounding sex – both in churches and our society at large – and a horribly wrong message may be sent to victims of sexual abuse, that is, by coming forward and speaking out, they would tear the congregation apart and give their church a bad name. To shatter this myth and build real harmony, churches must have a clear and upfront zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment, put in place a fair and concrete

complaint-handling mechanism, and make it known to each and every congregant and employee.

Those who appeal to biblical verses and argue that victims of sexual harassment should forgive the perpetrators and wait for God to mete out judgment are completely misguided. Sexual harassment is unlawful under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance; any organisation who genuinely cares for the well-being of its members wouldn't even consider playing down the problem. As the global #MeToo movement has shown, only when we stop blaming the victim and start breaking the silence can we work towards a society truly free of sexual harassment.

In response to recent reports of sexual harassment in Hong Kong churches, the EOC has taken the initiative to reach out to related Christian umbrella organisations, inviting them to establish an anti-sexual harassment policy and a complaint-handling mechanism with our assistance. This continues our ongoing efforts to raise awareness via our anti-sexual harassment campaign, launched in 2013 and targeting a wide range of sectors, from education and sports to social welfare and service industries. By conducting surveys, drafting policy frameworks and giving training sessions, the EOC has strived to gauge the severity of the problem in different fields and encourage the adoption of preventive measures at the same time.

Given that there are nearly 1,300 churches in Hong Kong with over 300,000 congregants, any further delay in addressing the issue of sexual harassment would expose a sizable population to continued, unnecessary risk. Ensuring that church-going remains a spiritually nourishing experience instead of an intimidating ordeal is not the work of God, but a responsibility of all church leaders.

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