

## **March 26, 2017 | Restore Us, O God: We Seek to Protect Our Children**

### **Reflections on planning and implementation of a Child Protection Sunday Service at Salford Mennonite Church**

In January a member of our congregation who had experienced child abuse suggested a service on the topic of child abuse during April, Child Abuse Prevention Month. We chose March 26<sup>th</sup> and Ezekiel 37:1-14 as the scripture.

Survivors of abuse were central throughout our planning. One survivor participated in our planning meetings. Early on we invited various survivors to offer their open-ended reflections, shaped by Ezekiel 37:1-14. Their reflections were courageous and insightful, giving rich meaning to the passage. They shaped the service significantly.

The survivors gave permission for large segments of their reflections to be read in the service itself. The moments in the service where survivors' words were read were the most powerful parts of the morning for many people. The survivors articulated their own journeys of pain and healing. They kept us from making generalizations or intellectualizing the problem. And having their words in the service helped everyone understand that child abuse does affect our church body. They have also made their reflections available for you as a part of this planning resource.

Our service was also significantly shaped by the presence of children in our congregation. Salford has experienced an influx of young families in the past 5-10 years and currently has a thriving family ministry. Caring for families and children is clearly a part of God's call to Salford. This call to care for the little ones was part of our motivation to focus on child safety in the worship service. It also was the element which centered our service and gave us hope. The first part of the morning was a celebration of children, helping ground us in that vision. This central vision worked well; it motivated us to address child abuse directly, and it also guided us through the most challenging parts of the service.

The planners acknowledge that there are stories of abuse in our midst that are unknown to us, and we knew that even for those who have not experienced abuse the service would be challenging. We addressed unknown survivors directly in the service. All three pastors had large roles in the service. (It was important that our lead pastor, who is male, preached.) And after the service we made several opportunities for people to seek conversation and process anything that may have been stirred up.

On this one Sunday morning we were able to open up a conversation that has been happening in pockets for a long time. But we are very aware that we were not able to address everything pertaining to child abuse. For example, there was much more that could have been said about perpetrators of child abuse, or about the challenges of preventing or responding to abuse within a church where perpetrators may be respected members of the community. We barely touched on prevention of abuse and we did not address teaching children about safety at all. We remember that one service will not be sufficient to protect our children; we will need to keep the conversation going in many different arenas if we are truly to be a community of safety and healing for all children.

*-Maria Hosler Byler, associate pastor for youth and family faith formation, Salford Mennonite Church  
April 3, 2017*