

THE CLIMATE FOR DISCLOSURE:  
AN EXAMINATION OF SEXUAL ABUSE  
AMONG RURAL MENNONITE FAMILIES

BY

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines victim/survivor identified supports that would encourage the disclosure of intrafamilial sexual abuse in rural Mennonite families and communities. A descriptive framework provided the basis for determining the issues that were related to the victims' decisions to disclose the sexual abuse. Data were obtained through face-to-face interviews. Descriptive research was employed to determine frequencies, similarities, and common themes that emerged between the interviews. Results revealed that the attitude and approach of the Mennonite church and family to sexual abuse affected the participants' decisions to disclose. There were several aspects of isolation that affected their decisions to disclose. Knowledge of other individuals who had endured sexual abuse, as well as their involvement with people or communities from outside their own affected their decision to disclose. Recommendations for further research to aid in the disclosure of sexual abuse are discussed so that the rural Mennonite families may strive for a climate that exudes safety and comfort.

To Dad, who taught me the  
value of hard work and perseverance.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Sexual abuse by a relative is not a new phenomenon, but rather a universal phenomenon that has existed since Biblical times, and continues to exist today. Sexual abuse by a relative can occur in all social classes, religions, races, and geographical locations of the world. Sexual abuse knows no boundaries, yet is generally regarded as taboo. Despite the fact that sexual abuse by a relative is condemned both by law, making it an indictable offence, and the Church, which regards it as a serious sin, it continues to exist. Butler (1985) eloquently described sexual abuse by a relative, what she termed as incest, as being "relentlessly democratic". There is no vaccination for it, thus no one is immune from it.

The reporting of all types of child abuse and neglect has increased greatly in the past few years, and continues to increase each year (NCCAN, 1981 as cited in Russell, 1986). According to the Rural Manitoba Project (1991), the reported incidence of child sexual abuse have increased in Canada as well. It has been suggested that anywhere from 50 to 90% of all sexual assaults upon children remain unreported

(Butler, 1985).

There is no consensus on the definition of sexual abuse by a relative, and the limits of the definition vary for each study. These variations make it difficult to obtain a clear picture of the prevalence and the incidence of sexual abuse by a relative, although it is clear that the reporting rates are increasing, and that there is cause for concern (Butler, 1985; Russell, 1986).

Mennonites have begun to publicly recognize the fact that sexual abuse by a relative exists within their community, and the issue is beginning to gain public attention. Block (1991) recently completed a study of the Mennonites within Winnipeg, Manitoba, and focused on the issue of domestic violence. His results corroborate the findings of various other researchers (Finkelhor, 1979; Russell, 1986), confirming that sexual abuse by a relative knows no boundaries.

Manitoba has a high Mennonite population who reside in rural Manitoba. There are presently no statistics to reflect the prevalence or incidence of sexual violations, in particular sexual abuse by a relative, within the rural Mennonite communities. Block (1991) found that approximately 25% of his sample reported that they had been sexually violated.

Although his study did not focus specifically on sexual abuse by a relative, his survey suggested that one third of the 25% who reported being sexually violated, were violated by a relative. If the rates that Block (1991) found are any indication of the prevalence of sexual abuse by a relative among the Mennonites living in the rural locale of Manitoba, coupled with the estimates of unreported assaults, then I believe that there is cause for strong concern for the victims, their families, and the health of the community.

Sexual abuse by a relative is viewed as taboo, yet the lack of documentation from victims, and the number of unconvicted perpetrators, reinforces that talking about, and reporting the sexual abuse is also a taboo. This leads to the concern of this research study. In order for victims and their families to receive help, the secret must be revealed. This study will consider the need to understand the context in which the victim feels safe enough, or sufficiently compelled to disclose the sexual abuse by a relative they have, or are, experiencing by looking at the victim's perspective of their family relationships, extrafamilial resources, and various other environmental factors. The goal of this study is to determine what is necessary to aid in the disclosure of

intrafamilial sexual abuse in the rural Mennonite families and communities.

### Definitions

#### Sexual Abuse By A Relative

Within Manitoba there is no legal definition of sexual abuse by a relative. Sexual abuse by a relative falls under the umbrella category of abuse. Under section 1 of The Act, as stated in the Manitoba Guidelines on Identifying and Reporting a Child in Need of Protection (Including Child Abuse) (1989, p. 4), the definition of abuse is:

...an act or omission of a parent or guardian of a child or of a person having care, custody, control or charge of a child, where the act or omission results in

- (a) physical injury to the child;
- (b) emotional disability of a permanent nature in the child or is likely to result in such a disability; or
- (c) sexual exploitation of the child with or without the child's consent;

For the purpose of this research study, the term intrafamilial sexual abuse will be defined as "any kind of exploitive sexual contact or attempted contact that

occurred between relatives, no matter how distant the relationship, before the victim turned eighteen years old" (Russell, 1986, p. 59). Relatives are defined as family members that are related in a manner that does not enable them to marry one another, and, or, they are related by blood.

Sexual contact will include intercourse, both vaginal and anal; oral sex; fondling of genitals; any type of sodomy; and any type of sexual contact where objects were used. This contact includes both where the perpetrator performs the act on and to the victim, and where the victim is instructed to perform the act on and to the perpetrator.

To expand on Russell's (1986) definition, I have chosen to include all types of sexual contact, as well as non-contact sexual abuse. The non-contact sexual abuse will include verbal propositions as well as exhibitionism. This is a characteristic that is very difficult to define. It has been decided that if the victim felt that she was disturbed, exploited or traumatized by the verbal propositions or the exhibitionism of the perpetrator, then based on this definition, the female was in fact victimized by a perpetrator. Specific characteristics of nonverbal contact will not be defined to allow for the victims

perception of being victimized.

One of the characteristics of intrafamilial sexual abuse that several of the recognized studies in the literature include in their definition of intrafamilial sexual abuse is an age discrepancy of five years or more between the perpetrator and the victim (i.e., Russell, 1986; Finkelhor, 1986). It is also believed that exploitive sexual contact and non-contact by a peer who is related to the victim can be disturbing to the victim. For the purpose of this study, where there is an age difference of five years or less between two individuals, the individuals will be defined as peers (Finkelhor, 1986). To eliminate peers from the definition would discount the disturbance and trauma that may be caused by such encounters. This adaptation of the definition is supported by Finkelhor (1986), who also suggested that by not including peers, research may be eliminating a portion of the population who has experienced intrafamilial sexual abuse.

For the purpose of this study, it was decided to include any relatives that are related by blood, no matter how distant the relationship. All forms of intrafamilial sexual abuse are traumatic and or abusive, and forms of intrafamilial sexual abuse other

than father-daughter need recognition (Meiselman, 1978).

### Victim

The term "victim" will be used throughout this research study. The current literature on intrafamilial sexual abuse favours the term "survivor", yet I believe that the use of the term "victim" reinforces the fact that a person was victimized, and that the responsibility for the victimization lies with the perpetrator, and not the victim. This is not meant to discredit, show disrespect, or deny that the term "survivor" has its merits because it does reflect the recognition and support for the struggle that the victim has endured. Rather, it is necessary to maintain clear boundaries, and provide a clear message as to where the responsibility lies. In addition, the focus of the research is on disclosure, and therefore implies that the victim may still be victimized, and has not yet gone through a healing process where she may identify herself as a survivor.

### Perpetrator

For the purpose of this study, the term "perpetrator" will be used to define the person who has committed the offending act, and has victimized another individual in a manner that corresponds with the



definition of intrafamilial sexual abuse as defined within this study.

Mennonite

The term "Mennonite" may be interpreted as a religion, a culture, or both. For the purpose of this research study, the term Mennonite will be defined as a religious and cultural lifestyle carried out by those that have adopted the religious traditions and beliefs as described by the Mennonite church. The participant need not presently hold membership with, nor attend a Mennonite church, yet at some point, either they or their parents will have held membership in a Mennonite church.

Rural Manitoba

"Rural Manitoba" will be defined as non-urban Manitoba. Non-urban Manitoba will be defined as any area outside the city limits of Winnipeg, Brandon, Thompson, and Portage la Prairie.

## Chapter II

### Review of Literature

There are many facets of intrafamilial sexual abuse that need to be taken into consideration, and each of those facets has unique characteristics. This segment will discuss some of the characteristics of sexual abuse by a relative, different types of sexual abuse by a relative, characteristics of family members, characteristics of two particular family systems, isolation, and finally, the issue of disclosure.

#### Characteristics of Sexual Abuse by a Relative

##### Where Does It Occur

The most common place for sexual abuse by a relative to occur is in the victim's own home. It is estimated that up to 95% of the cases of sexual abuse by a relative take place while the victims live with their parents, and most often the perpetrator lives under the same roof as the victim. The abuse occurs most often right in the victim's own bed, in the perpetrator's bed, or both (Russell, 1986).

##### Frequency and Duration of Sexual Abuse Victimization

Research has found that almost half (43%) of the victims of sexual abuse by a relative claim to have been victimized only once. Although it is possible

that the victims could be repressing other incidents, it seems doubtful that almost half would repress all other experiences. Therefore, the possibility exists that a victim could have had one experience of sexual abuse by a relative (Russell, 1986).

Approximately one third (31%) of the experiences of sexual abuse by a relative have been reported to have occurred two to five times. Seventeen percent have occurred from six to twenty times, and 10% over twenty times (Russell, 1986).

The frequency is important to note because a one time occurrence may be just as traumatic as numerous occurrences. For every victim that has had a one time occurrence, the perpetrator may have victimized numerous females. Victims may feel unjustified in reporting one time incidents, just as victims who have experienced multiple incidents may grow to feel that they deserve the treatment, and may also feel unjustified in reporting (Meiselman, 1978; Russell, 1986).

The duration of the sexual abuse can have a traumatic impact on the victim, and also affect their disclosure. According to Russell (1986), the time period over which the multiple incidents of sexual abuse by a relative occurred were: 35% occurred over a

period of less than six months; 31% occurred over a period of more than six months but less than two years; 28% occurred over a period of more than two years but less than ten years; and 6% occurred over a period of more than ten years.

#### Different Types of Sexual Abuse by a Relative

Sexual abuse by a relative is a violation against women, although not all literature views it this way. For example, Leviticus (18:6-18), the Forbidden Sexual Practices state:

6The Lord gave the following regulations. Do not have sexual intercourse with any of your relatives. 7Do not disgrace your father by having intercourse with your mother. You must not disgrace your own mother. 8Do not disgrace your father by having intercourse with any of his other wives. 9Do not have intercourse with your sister or your stepsister, whether or not she was brought up in the same house with you. 10Do not have intercourse with your granddaughter; that would be a disgrace to you. 11Do not have intercourse with a half sister; she, too, is your sister. 12-13Do not have intercourse with an aunt, whether she is your father's sister or your mother's sister.

14Do not have intercourse with your uncle's wife; she, too, is your aunt. 15Do not have intercourse with your daughter-in-law 16or with your brother's wife. 17Do not have intercourse with the daughter or granddaughter of a woman with whom you have had intercourse; they may be related to you, and that would be incest. 18Do not take your wife's sister as one of your wives, as long as your wife is living.

This passage implies that sex is an act that men initiate, and have the power to control, and that women receive, and submit to those sexual relations. Men have a right to ownership, use, and exchange, and women are to provide this. This law implies that violations of sexual abuse by a relative are offenses of those male rights, rather than violations of sexual abuse against women (Herman, 1981). Regardless of how the man is related to the woman, sexual abuse is a violation against the woman, and it is traumatic.

There are three major factors that can determine the degree of trauma to a victim: closeness in age, degree of force used, and duration. When the victim and the perpetrator are close in age, the literature suggests that sexual abuse experiences may be less traumatic than if there is a greater age difference

between the two individuals. The greater the age difference, the more power the perpetrator may hold, and thus the victim feels more trapped and further traumatized. The trauma of sexual abuse by a relative is also compounded by the use of physical force and violence, and coercion. The duration of the relationship can also exacerbate the trauma. This is not to say that one time occurrences of sexual abuse are not traumatic, but rather that a lengthy sexually abusive relationship can have detrimental effects on the victim (Finkelhor, 1979; 1986; Russell, 1986; Thorman, 1983).

The five types of sexual abuse by a relative that will be discussed are: uncle-niece; brother-sister; cousin-cousin; grandfather-granddaughter; and father-daughter.

#### Uncle-Niece

There are two factors that can determine the extent of the trauma. First, if the uncle is considerably older than the victim, the relationship may resemble that of a father and daughter in a sexually abusive relationship. Second, if the uncle lives in the same household as the niece, the relationship parallels the father-daughter sexual abuse relationship in that the uncle is perceived to be a

person who acts in a parental role (Thorman, 1983).

When the perpetrator is the female's uncle, the effects may not be as traumatic as they may be in father-daughter sexual abuse. The family may not be disrupted in the same way because the family unit of the victim is not as threatened by breakdown (Thorman, 1983).

For this reason, the uncle generally obtains the cooperation of the niece in a gentle manner. The uncle and niece are not usually engaged in as close a relationship as in a father-daughter relationship, yet trust still exists. The impact of the relationship may become more severe if the uncle uses force (Thorman, 1983).

#### Brother-Sister

It is believed that sexual contact between brothers and sisters occurs in one out of ten families and the various forms of sexual interaction are widespread. It is believed to be more common than father-daughter sexual abuse, yet it is less frequently reported (Thorman, 1983).

The dynamics of brother-sister sexual abuse are different from the other types due to the closeness in age. The closeness in age seems to diminish the stigma attached to it because sexual contact seems to be more

acceptable between two people that are closer in age, than when there is a larger age difference (Thorman, 1983). The degree of harmful effects depends on the sexually abusive activities, the degree of force used, and the duration.

The closer the brother and sister are in age, the less harmful the effects. Females generally resent the brother for initiating the bothersome relationship, yet if the relationship grows out of curiosity, and develops sexually, she may find it highly repulsive (Thorman, 1983).

If the brother is considerably older than the sister, she may find the experience exploitive. The effects may become more harmful if the brother is abrupt and uses force to get the sister to comply with his sexual demands (Thorman, 1983).

Brother-sister sexual abuse is usually terminated after a shorter duration of time than father-daughter sexual abuse. One reason is because the sister feels more able to take charge and terminate the relationship (Thorman, 1983).

Brothers seem to assume that their sister will not disclose because they feel that the sister may fear being punished for her role in the relationship. The sister is not likely to disclose the sexual abuse,



possibly because she perceives herself as cooperating in the sexual relationship. She may also assume that her mother already knows, and has chosen not to intervene (Thorman, 1983).

#### Cousin-Cousin

This type of sexual abuse appears to rank as less traumatic than other types, particularly if the cousins are peers. The degree of trauma may be dependent on the amount of force and violence used, the proximity of living situation, and the difference in age. The greater the difference in age, the more the perpetrator may hold power over the victim, and may also resemble a parent. If the perpetrating cousin lives in the same house as the victim, the trauma may also be increased because the victim may feel even more trapped, and with fewer options and opportunities to escape the violations.

Cousin-cousin sexual abuse may be paralleled to brother-sister sexual abuse in that there may be less of an age difference, and that the victim may feel confused, feeling that she may have allowed the sexual abuse to occur. Although cousins are not as likely to live in the same house, victims may be reluctant to disclose for fear of disrupting the home of a relative (Thorman, 1983), as well as many other reasons to be

discussed throughout this review.

#### Grandfather-Granddaughter

When the grandfather lives in the same house as the granddaughter, he is often relegated to the role of baby-sitter, leaving him alone with his granddaughter. When the two live in the same house, the chance of a sexually abusive relationship increases, and the female may feel even more trapped and unable to terminate the relationship (Thorman, 1983).

The grandfather may experience feelings of loneliness, loss of self respect, inadequacy, and powerlessness. They parallel fathers who are sexually abusive toward a relative in that they have the same doubts about their masculinity (Thorman, 1983).

He may seek affection through cuddling, hugging, and kissing, but the displays of affection may eventually take on a sexual tone. Initially, the granddaughter may find pleasure in the relationship, having her needs for attention and affection met; yet, if, and when, she begins to recognize the inappropriateness of the contact, she may feel guilty (Thorman, 1983).

Children may tell their parents about the relationship, but parents often discount the stories, believing they are not possible, or are innocent

actions on the part of the grandfather. By discounting these stories, the parents perpetuate the cycle of sexual abuse by empowering the grandfather to further victimize their daughter (Thorman, 1983).

#### Father-Daughter

Father-daughter sexual abuse is the most highly reported type of sexual abuse by a relative (Meiselman, 1981; Thorman, 1983; Finkelhor, 1986; Russell, 1986). Father-daughter sexual abuse is the type most commonly addressed throughout the research literature as well.

In the story of Lot (Genesis 19:30-36) and the pregnancy of his two daughters, the need to preserve the father's family line took precedence over the taboo of sexual abuse by a relative, making intercourse acceptable. The daughters are portrayed as the seductive aggressors, and the father is spared all responsibility due to the effects of alcohol and his passive role. The Bible attempts to make an allowance for the daughters' actions, yet the message is that the responsibility lies solely with the daughters, dismissing the father of all responsibility.

The father may never actually physically touch his daughter. The utterances of sexual comments and desires, or the sight of a father standing naked at the doorway of his daughter's bedroom, with an erect penis,

and a sexual expression on his face, may be extremely traumatic to a daughter. Confusion, disgust, and fear may be just a few of the emotions she may feel as a result of what may appear to be a harmless action (Butler, 1985).

The father who engages in sexually abusive activities with a relative may approach his daughter in numerous ways. He may begin by showing normal expressions of physical affection, which, over a period of time, grow more intense and sexual in nature. The daughter may perceive the sexual activities as merely another kind of parental affection, at least until she begins to wonder why she is supposed to keep it a secret.

The sexual activity may also begin abruptly. To induce cooperation, the father may provide some sort of rationalized explanation. Very young children are easily deceived if the father introduces the activity as a game. This deception may be easier to employ with children who have received no sex education, and, or, the child is isolated from her peers (Meiselman, 1978).

Older daughters may be persuaded to comply to the father's demands through the use of a variety of reasons. For example, the mother may not be in the home due to death, or illness, and some daughters are

told that it is their duty to replace the mother. The most single deceptive reported rationale is that daughters are given a "sex education" by their fathers (Meiselman, 1978).

Although father-daughter sexual abuse seems to be the most difficult type to understand, it is probably the type that requires the least effort on the part of the perpetrator. The father already has the trust of the daughter, coupled with easy access. In addition, many children are taught to obey their parents (Colossians 3:20; Ephesians 6:1-3), making resistance or defiance less likely. Thus, this offence is not only a violation of boundaries, and an inability to control impulses, it is also a violation trust and an abuse of power.

The victim may find this type of sexual abuse difficult to disclose because there may be more risks involved. To disclose means that the daughter would defy and disobey the parent, which to many, is considered a rule not to be broken (Colossians 3:20; Ephesians 6:1-3). The daughter risks disrupting the family system, and possibly having the father or herself removed from the home (Renvoize, 1982), and she also faces possible rejection and alienation from her family and the perpetrator (Renvoize, 1982; Russell,

1986). She may not want to disclose because she may not realize to what extent the sexual abuse is wrong, and due to the trust involved between a father and daughter, she may feel such a strong bond to her perpetrator, that disclosing does not enter her mind.

### Characteristics of Family Members

Families where there has been sexual abuse by a relative, are often characterized by triangulation, particularly when father-daughter sexual abuse exists. "A triangle is any three-way relationship. In each corner there can be an individual or a group of people. The basic family triangle is father, mother, child" (Richardson, 1987, p. 51). In order to understand the dynamics of sexual abuse by a relative, it is necessary to understand the mother, the father, or perpetrator, and the victim, both as individuals, and as a system.

#### The Mother

Although the victim's mother may not sexually abuse her daughter directly, her role in the family has an effect on the daughter, the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, disclosure and intervention. The mother has often been blamed for allowing the sexual abuse to occur, and for not protecting her daughter, when in fact, the mother also

seems to have no power in the family system. There are many factors that contribute to the mother's behaviour and her passive role.

Women who have been victims of sexual abuse by a relative, and have not received treatment are less likely to protect their daughters when they themselves, are victims of sexual abuse. These mothers may also be modelling passivity and submission to their daughters, teaching them that they do not have the right to stand up for themselves, and to be assertive (Herman, 1981; 1 Timothy 2:11-12).

The mothers within families where sexual abuse occurs are generally less educated than their husbands. This limits their opportunities for viable employment outside the home, placing them in a position to be economically dependent on their husbands. This can be even more limiting when the family lives in a rural location because there are less employment opportunities and options. If the mother is aware of the sexual abuse, it is very risky to reveal the secret because the father may be removed from the home, placing the family's financial support in jeopardy (Everson, Hunter, Runyon, Edelsohn, & Coulter, 1989; Herman, 1981).

Sexual abuse by a relative is more commonly found

in patriarchal families, where the role of the mother is to keep house, and bear and raise the children (Gil, 1988). Her place is in the home, and this role may be very stressful and oppressive on the mother. The wife may see it has her responsibility to submit to her husband, just as the church submits itself to Christ (Colossians 3:18; Ephesians 4:22-24).

This stress and oppression may be exacerbated by having a large number of children, and several researchers have commented on the large number of children that have been found in families where sexual abuse by a relative occurs (Cavallin, 1966; Lukianowicz, 1972; Maisch, 1972; Tormes, 1968, as cited in Herman, 1981). The mother bears, and usually raises the children. This may exhaust her both physically and emotionally, creating extreme stress. Due to the increased number of children, supervision may be reduced, providing the perpetrator the opportunity to molest. The mother may also be emotionally exhausted, reducing the level of nurturing and maternal affection the children receive (Herman, 1981; Tormes, 1968).

Lack of employment opportunities is not the only factor restricting the mother from outside supports. Her life is consumed by a demanding husband, needy children, and an oppressive environment. She may be



described as weak and powerless, yet strong in the sense that she knows how to endure suffering.

Herman (1981, p. 78) summed up the role of the mother as:

Economically dependent, socially isolated, in poor health, and encumbered with the care of many small children, these mothers were in no position to challenge their husbands' domination or to resist their abuses. No matter how badly they were treated, most simply saw no option other than submission to their husbands. They conveyed to their daughters the belief that a woman is defenceless against a man, that marriage must be preserved at all costs, and that a wife's duty is to serve and endure.

#### The Perpetrator

The potential for sexual abuse by a relative exists in almost every family. It is not uncommon for people who live together for an extended period of time to become dependent on one another for love, support, and affection, and have daily intimate contact. The difference between a family where there is no sexual abuse by a relative, and a family where sexual abuse by a relative occurs, is that in a family where no sexual abuse occurs, the male, or father, recognizes

appropriate boundaries and respects those boundaries, regardless of any urges he may experience. In a family where sexual abuse by a relative occurs, the male violates those boundaries, particularly those of trust, and lacks impulse control (Thorman, 1983).

In addition to the lack of impulse control, perpetrators are described as the perfect patriachs. They are the head of the household, where they are usually authoritarian in nature. They are very powerful men, who maintain control of the family, and all the actions of the family, in particular his wife and daughter.

Within a patriarchal and authoritarian family, the sex roles are rigidly defined. The husband is the bread winner, and he takes great pride in this role. Perpetrators are very competent and hard working men, who generally have successful employment histories (Weiner, 1964). It is of utmost importance for them to maintain the facade that they are fully competent in their patriarchal role (Lustig, Dresser, Spellman, & Murray, 1966). If the mother is unable to fulfil her role, rather than becoming a nurturing father to the children, he perceives this as being cheated, and demands nurturing from his daughter. On the other hand, the father may be demanding sex from both his

wife and daughter(s); having his needs fulfilled from both/all females.

Within the home, the male is feared. He maintains his power through his position and role of dominance, and intimidates and controls the family (Butler, 1978; Herman, 1981). Just as the daughter may learn passivity and submission from her mother, sons may learn to be dominant and authoritarian from their fathers.

The father portrays a very different image to outsiders, ranging from a sympathetic, respectable, and somewhat admirable man, to a weak, pitiful man, who may actually appear as being powerless and dominated by other family members. These men do not exercise their power outside the home with those who have authority over them. They only exercise their power with their subordinate family members. They assess the relative power of the other person, and adjust their behaviour accordingly. This behaviour makes it extremely difficult to detect sexual abuse, and to convince outsiders that the male can be something other than what he portrays to outsiders (Butler, 1978; Herman, 1981).

They are often churchgoing men, who are very respected within their community. They conform to the

traditional norms, yet the dysfunction goes unnoticed. A respondent in Herman's (1981) survey clearly depicted the situation by saying, "Yes, we were what you call an intact family. My mother lived at Church and Church functions. My father sang in the choir, and he molested me while my mother was at Sunday School class parties. There was no drinking or smoking or anything the world could see. Only God knows" (p. 71).

Although violence and physical force are often used to gain compliance, the effects are generally not severe enough to require medical attention, or they may be covered up at home (Herman, 1981). Of the three types of forces (violent and physical; coercive; and threatening) physical is the least common in cases of sexual abuse by a relative (Russell, 1986).

It is more common for the perpetrator to use threats or duress to gain compliance than it is to use physical force, yet even threats and duress are not used in the majority of sexual abuse cases either. Due to the trust level between the perpetrator and the victim, it seems that threats are not usually necessary at the beginning of a relationship where sexual abuse is or will occur. Threats become more necessary in order for the perpetrator to prevent the victim from revealing the secret (Meiselman, 1978). The types of

threats and duress vary according to the types of sexual demands that the perpetrator is placing on the victim (Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy, & Christenson, 1965).

The lack of force or specific threats in father-daughter sexual abuse do not imply that the victim is actively cooperating in the activity. Instead, she is generally passive because of her perception of the father's authority and because of all of her past experience with failures to obey him. The authoritarian position of the father in the family makes it extremely difficult to distinguish between real willingness, and submission to authority. Due to the power of the father, the victim is most likely to go along passively with his demands for sexual activity. Physical resistance is unthinkable to her and leaving the home is a very frightening prospect, and is not likely an option. Victims often fear that their perpetrator will carry out their threats, and submit for that reason as well. "The authoritarian father-passive daughter combination is the most common incest initiation pattern when the daughter is very young; an adolescent daughter is more likely to rebel and to see leaving the home as a real alternative to submitting to incest" (Meiselman, 1978, p. 149-50).

A third way to obtain the cooperation of a victim

is by rewarding her in various ways. Men who are sexual offenders to female relatives often behave toward their victims as though they were young adolescent boys making their first attempts at dating. They may provide her with gifts, money, and clothing, and are very guarded and jealous of other men, while maintaining a position as the all-powerful father (Brady, 1979; Cormier, Kennedy, & Sangowicz, 1962), or over protective brother. In cases of sexual abuse between father and daughter, many fathers tend to be more loving and attentive toward the daughter that they molest as compared to their other children, creating more leverage in obtaining, and maintaining the daughters cooperation (Meiselman, 1978).

In order to relieve themselves of their guilt, the perpetrators tend to rationalize their actions. He may create a fairly reasonable explanation for his behaviour, and present these rationalizations to the daughter/victim in order to enlist her cooperation in the sexual activity. If they are exposed they often try to rationalize their actions in order to minimize the consequences.

Rationalizations range from justifications on the grounds of fulfilling the sexual desires of an already promiscuous and seductive daughter so that she would

not have to seek sex outside the family (Meiselman, 1978), to providing a virtuous daughter with an essential sex education (Gebbard, Gagnon, Pomeroy, & Christenson, 1965). Perpetrators view it as their responsibility and duty to teach their daughter the facts of life (Weiner, 1962), and to prevent them from becoming frigid, like their wives. The perpetrators believe that their wives' frigidity explained and excused their sexually abusive behaviour (Cormier, Kennedy, and Sangowicz, 1962). In addition, due to increased pregnancies (Herman, 1981), the mother may seem inaccessible to her husband while she is pregnant, creating another rationalization for him to turn to his daughter.

"Much of the isolation and punishment of the aggressor in intrafamilial sexual abuse is a result of society's insistence on denying any similarity between these men and the rest of us" (Butler, 1985, p. 65). This is an important point because in many ways, perpetrators are chameleons who blend in with the community, and adjust their behaviour according to the situation they are in. The victim is well aware of how her perpetrator adapts to the situation. For this reason, the victim is riddled with confusion, self-doubt, and feelings of craziness. This makes it that

much more difficult for the victim to feel compelled to disclose, knowing that others may not believe her.

#### The Victim of Sexual Abuse by a Relative

There are many characteristics that distinguish victims of sexual abuse by a relative from those who have not been victims of sexual abuse by a relative. Most of the characteristics evolve and develop due to the abuse itself, and they are generally a result of, rather than the cause of sexual abuse. The perspective and feelings of the victim are very important to understand when studying the area of sexual abuse by a relative and disclosure.

Age of Onset. Females are vulnerable to sexual violations by relatives at all ages, yet they seem to be the most vulnerable between the ages of eight to twelve, which signify the preadolescent period. The mean ages found in three major surveys are: (a) 9 years, 9 months (9.9) (Finkelhor, 1979); (b) 11 years, one and one half months (11.15) (Russell, 1986); and (c) 11 years, two months (11.2) (Wyatt, 1985). Females seem to be less vulnerable when they are six to seven years old (Finkelhor, 1986; Russell, 1986). The use of mean ages may not accurately reflect the true age of onset though due to different age ranges within the sample population, and differences in the definition of



incest or sexual abuse. The age of onset is usually determined from surveys, which relies on the memory of the victim, or from the first reported incident, which is not necessarily the first incident.

Ordinal Position of Siblings. There is ample literature to support the theory that ordinal position of siblings plays a role in the experiences of sexual abuse of a female, particularly in the case of father-daughter sexual abuse. Although the results were not statistically significant, Finkelhor (1979) suggested that overall, middle daughters are more likely to have experiences of sexual abuse by a relative, than daughters in other ordinal positions.

In the case of father-daughter sexual abuse specifically, the eldest daughter is the most at risk of all the siblings (Finkelhor, 1979; Herman, 1981; Meiselman, 1978; Weinberg, 1955). Weinberg (1955) found that 64% of the daughters who were molested by their fathers were the eldest in family, and an even higher percentage were the eldest daughter living in the home at the time when the sexual abuse began.

The younger daughters are also at risk because if there is no intervention the perpetrator will move to the next daughter. In the case of father-daughter sexual abuse, if the father pursues the younger

siblings, it is usually because the eldest daughter has rejected him, has left home (Finkelhor, 1979), or as Weinberg (1955) found, the father perceived the younger daughter as being more docile, thus easier to coerce into complying to his demands.

Assigned Role. Most females victims are assigned a role within the home, and this role entitles them to a special place within the family. This special place may mean that they are not subjected to the punishments that other siblings may receive, or to the other extreme, where they receive pampering and gifts from the perpetrator. They recognize their special place in the family by sometimes being spared the violent force that other siblings may receive, and begin to use that special place to their advantage (Herman, 1981). This may be one way for the victim to have her needs met, and to feel a sense of power in the sexually abusive relationship. On the other hand, others may be used as scapegoats, and always receive the blame for all that goes wrong (Thorman, 1983). Since the victim already feels that the sexual abuse is her fault, it is not difficult to convince a victim that many other things may be her fault as well. This transfers the guilt and blame from the perpetrator, to the victim.

Role reversal is also very common, where the

daughter who experiences sexual abuse by a relative, particularly if she is the eldest, acts as a "little mother". In this role she may care for younger siblings, and take on the responsibility of major household tasks. The pride that she derives from these accomplishments seems to compensate for her lost childhood (Herman, 1981).

In the case of father-daughter sexual abuse, daughters may be assigned the task of keeping daddy happy. This task may involve being the father's confidante, listening to their father's secrets and grievances, or acting as a mediator between her parents, placating the father when no one else may be able to communicate with him. In many ways, their role is a pivotal and integral one that holds the family together, and the daughter may feel responsible to ensure that the family is kept intact (Brady, 1979; Herman, 1981).

Her View of her Parents. Within a family where sexual abuse occurs, the mother plays a role in the dynamics of the sexual abuse. Her role affects the structure and relationships within the family, she models a type of behaviour to her daughter(s), and her role can ultimately effect the issue of disclosure. The daughter who has been sexually abused by a relative

may resent her mother, often because the father complains that his wife is cold, frigid, and withholds sex. Because the daughter also lacks the maternal affection she needs, and feels neglected by her mother, she may believe that her father is telling the truth (Herman, 1981).

As young children, daughters may see how overburdened their mothers are, yet all they can feel at that time is that they are obligated to provide nurturing for others, allowing their own needs to go unmet. This can result in the daughter feeling hostile and alienated from their mother, strengthening the bond with the father, who is meeting the daughters needs. The primary bonds of trust seem to lack between the mother and daughter, and the daughters view their mother as weak, helpless, and unable to protect them (Herman, 1981; Maisch, 1972).

This alienation draws the daughter to her father, perceiving him as more competent and powerful (Herman, 1981). The father further gains the daughters trust and confidence by providing the care, attention, and affection she lacks from her mother, and in turn she feels obligated to comply with his sexual demands (Herman, 1981).

Due to the father's clandestine behaviour, she may

sense that something is wrong with their relationship. Sex is dreaded and feared, and she feels disgust and shame for herself. The daughter may respond physiologically to the sex, and in a small number of cases, she may perceive this response as a sign that she is enjoying the sex (Herman, 1981; Meiselman, 1978). She does not understand that this is a natural response, yet her perception only serves to exacerbate her feelings of guilt.

The alienation from her mother, the dysfunctional bond to her father, or perpetrator, and her important role in the family structure, strengthen the secret, and reduce the chance of disclosure. This is further strengthened if the daughter does not realize to what degree the perpetrator's behaviour is wrong.

### Characteristics of Two Family Systems

#### The Mennonite Family

One particular family that deserves attention is the Mennonite family. Mennonites form a large portion of the Manitoba population, in particular, the rural and farm based population (Bond & Harvey, 1989).

The Mennonites were established during the European Anabaptist movement during the 16th century. This movement was led by Menno Simons, a former

ordained Catholic priest. They migrated from central Europe to eastern Europe, and then to North and South America. The Mennonites have remained very close, and reside in concentrated communities throughout Manitoba (Bond & Harvey, 1989).

The Mennonites are a heterogeneous group of people, and there are as many as 23 different conferences and congregations of Mennonites (Reimer, 1984). Even within a specific conference there are differences, and these can vary between communities and congregations.

Mennonites range from being very progressive, where it is difficult to distinguish between the Mennonite and non-Mennonite communities (Bond & Harvey, 1989), to being very austere, and conservative. It is not possible to generalize all Mennonites, although there are some common threads that continue to exist among almost all communities.

The Mennonites can be described as both a religion and an ethnic group (Redekop, 1987). Their religious beliefs govern the practices of their family traditions, schools, and day-to-day living. The degree to which this occurs may depend on the individual conference and or community.

Recently, the issue of domestic violence has been

recognized within the Mennonite communities. Block (1991) examined the issue of domestic violence within the Mennonite community in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Through his survey, approximately 25% of his sampled reported that they had been sexually violated. Block provided a breakdown of the identity of the sexual abusers (his terms), and found that 7.0% of the college sample, and 8.0% of the random population were violated by their father, brother, or some other relative. Although there are no specific rates of sexual abuse by a relative for the Mennonites living in rural Manitoba, it can be assumed that these rates can be generalized to the rural community.

#### The Family Where Sexual Abuse Occurs by a Relative

Of all forms of intrafamilial sexual abuse, father-daughter is the one that has been researched the most. Although there is no one specific formula that describes the family where sexual abuse occurs, all families where father-daughter sexual abuse occurs are characterized by specific deficiencies (Thorman (1983, p. 77-8).

Families where sexual abuse by a relative occurs have been described as experiencing high levels of stress with inadequate resources to deal with that stress (Horowitz & Woloch, 1981). As a result, the

family is unable to cope with stress. Internal conflict, alienation, and ineffective communication weaken the family, making them exceptionally vulnerable. This vulnerability disables the family, and sabotages their ability to cope with crisis situations (Thorman, 1983).

Communication is confused. Families where sexual abuse by a relative occurs struggle with clear communication, honest expression of feelings, and resolving conflict through cooperative negotiation. The messages are often conveyed in an ambiguous and, or, inconsistent manner, further confusing the family system (Thorman, 1983).

Family members lack autonomy. The family system where sexual abuse by a relative occurs creates an enmeshed web among it's members where all members are highly dependent on one another. Their boundaries are blurred and their roles are tangled together, making them dependent and co-dependent on one another. This symbiotic enmeshment prohibits the development of autonomy, and thus the development of a self-identity and individuality. These restrictions inhibit personal growth of family members, and eventually result in a low self-esteem (Thorman, 1983). An example of enmeshment is the role reversal that takes place



between the mother and daughter in a family where sexual abuse by a relative occurs.

Family affect is not supportive to family members. Families where sexual abuse by a relative occurs are unable to draw support from one another (Davis & Graybill, 1983); therefore, they lack the supportive relationships that create an environment conducive to optimal functioning of all family members. The members exploit one another, and sexual contacts are confused or equated with genuine expressions of love, warmth, attachment, affection, and nurturing (Thorman, 1983).

Mothers may be physically or psychologically absent. Rather than both parents providing optimal care and nurturing for the children, the mother feels remote and alienated. She often feels inadequate, withdrawing from the nurturing role, and immersing herself in work or activities that are satisfying and fulfilling to her (Thorman, 1983).

The mother-daughter roles are sometimes reversed. The generational boundaries become blurred, and role expectations are distorted and violated, with both parents perceiving the daughter as an adult. Often, daughters assume the role of the mother, and the relationship between the mother and the daughter is inappropriately structured (Thorman, 1983).

There is a lack of a strong coalition between the parents. The ties between partners are weak, with both of them feeling alienated and lonely. There is often a division or conflict between the husband and wife (Thorman, 1983).

Conflict may be resolved through scapegoating. When conflict arises, rather than resolving the issue through healthy negotiation, they avoid and ignore direct resolution. Instead, their conflicts may be resolved by drawing the victim into the conflict, and scapegoating the victim. The victim acts as the pivotal point in the triangle where two others are involved, and the victim takes the brunt of the blame for something they are not responsible for. The result is that the marriage is maintained, and the conflict appears to be resolved; all at the expense of the victim (Thorman, 1983).

Power is unequally distributed between the husband and wife. Within the marital relationship, the father holds a position of dominance and power, while the mother is submissive, and feels powerless. The husband's position of power transfers beyond the marital relationship, and he is able to control all aspects of his partners' as well as the lives of their children. Decisions are not made mutually, but rather,

the father dictates decisions independent of, and without consulting his partner (Thorman, 1983). "Abusing families tend to place a higher value on authoritarian means of control and to have less conviction in rational guidance and distraction techniques" (Corse, Schmid, & Trickett, 1990, p. 46).

In families where sexual abuse by a relative occurs, both the individual family members, as well as the entire family, are socially isolated. Generally, they form rigid and impenetrable boundaries between the family and the outside world. They are a closed family system that actively discourages contact with persons outside the family system (Mrazek & Kempe, 1981). Family members depend on other family members to meet their needs, and do not allow input from the external environment and social network. This creates a barrier to socialization with other persons. This barrier inhibits the possibility of personal growth, access to information that may permeate the distorted beliefs that have been nurtured within the closed, sexually abusive family, and protects the perpetrator from being exposed (Thorman, 1983).

Families where sexual abuse by a relative occurs are much too complex to be described in any unilateral way, and there is no one contributing factor that can

explain its onset or continuation. Of all the contributing factors mentioned in the literature, the two most predictive factors are likely to be the absence of a strong, satisfying marital bond where there is equal power among all family members, and prior sexually abusive behaviour somewhere in the family (Mrazek & Kempe, 1981).

### Isolation

#### Social Isolation

Social isolation is a risk factor of interest to sexual abuse research for two reasons. First, there are documented accounts of concentrations of sexually abusive families in rural areas (Summit & Kryso, 1978). In addition, numerous research studies have correlated social isolation with other forms of child abuse and neglect within families (Corse, Schmid, & Trickett, 1990; Garbarino & Stocking, 1980, as cited in Finkelhor, 1986).

Although living in a rural location does not imply social isolation, and the two are not synonymous, it seems that a portion of those sexually abusive families in rural areas may also experience social isolation. If they do experience social isolation, then it would seem that the victim and family are further at risk

because of the isolation. Social isolation prevents anyone from the outside to penetrate their secretive system.

#### Geographical/Rural

The notion that the prevalence of sexual abuse is higher in rural communities is gaining support (Lukianowicz, 1972; Finkelhor, 1979). Russell (1986) found that the prevalence rate of sexual abuse in rural communities had increased.

Lukianowicz (1972) found that geographical location did in fact have an effect on the rate of incestuous abuse (his term). His research was conducted in Northern Ireland, and found that 56% (n=17) of the subjects came from the country (his term); 6 were small farmers, and 11 were farm labourers.

Finkelhor (1979) provided the first survey evidence that sexual abuse by a relative and sexual victimization are higher in rural areas. Finkelhor surveyed a sample of 530 female rural residents, where 16 of the 530 had farm backgrounds. Those with farm backgrounds reported the highest rates of sexual abuse by a relative and the results were statistically significant (75% at the  $p < .001$  level of significance). Although there were no reports of father-daughter

sexual abuse from those with farm backgrounds though, 1.3% of the 28% who reported sexual abuse by a relative from rural communities other than farms, reported father-daughter sexual abuse. Caution must be taken due to the small size of the farm sample, yet Finkelhor's results show a trend that suggest continued research in this area is needed. The small sample size did not allow Finkelhor to examine the sample further, but he suggested that there was "something special about farms, not just rural areas, that affects the rates" (Finkelhor, 1979, p. 113). Farms tend to be particularly isolated, which lends support for the question of social isolation.

#### Nature of Rural Families

Families who reside in rural communities have been described as very private, and tend to rely on the family itself for problem-solving. When domestic problems do occur, rural families have also been described as minimizing the significance and seriousness of the problems. The family further reinforces the minimization of their domestic problems through their belief of "whatever goes on in the home is the family's own business" (Fortune & Hormann, 1980, p. 79).

Sexual abuse by a relative is considered to be a

very serious "domestic problem". If the family chooses to minimize the significance and seriousness of all domestic problems, and sexual abuse by a relative is considered to be a domestic problem, then it can be assumed that the family will minimize the significance and seriousness of sexual abuse by a relative as well.

### Privacy

It can be very difficult to remain anonymous while residing in a rural setting, particularly in a small town community. The general feeling is that everyone in the community tends to know your business, and the events in the community. This lack of anonymity can have several effects. First, the victim is caught in a situation which may restrict her from seeking help. By speaking out and seeking help, the victim risks having the community find out about the sexual abuse, while at the same time defying the rule of keeping the family's business within the home. On the other hand, the lack of anonymity could be a support to the victim in that she may not need to verbalize or express her victimization, but rather people will know by word of mouth (Fortune & Hormann, 1980). Finally, the result of the latter situation could be very damaging to a victim if community members are aware of the sexual abuse that is taking place, and they choose to remain

silent, which is a lack of support and a form of perpetuating the cycle of violence, or, the community ostracizes and blames the victim for the sexual abuse.

#### Transportation

Rural areas generally lack public transportation, therefore, children, adolescents and those who are not able to, or do not have their own transportation, are limited in their options as to how they will transport themselves to a place where they can seek help (Fortune & Hormann, 1980).

#### Weather

Manitoba winters can be very cold and the weather can be unpredictable. Heavy snowfalls or extremely cold temperatures can make travel impossible at times. This restriction further isolates the victim in a potentially dangerous situation (Fortune & Hormann, (1980).

#### Medical Care

Many of the residents in rural communities see a doctor who the family may have known for some time, possibly all their life, and, or, the family knows quite well. This can make it very uncomfortable and difficult for patients/victims to seek medical help should they need it (Fortune & Hormann, 1980).



Media

Many of the rural communities do not have a formal broadcast media, making it difficult to convey information regarding abuse, and how and where to seek support (Fortune & Hormann, 1980). In addition, some Mennonite communities exist as closed systems, choosing to not make use of various forms of media, such as television.

Rural communities do not benefit from other forms of media, such as public advertisements. Public transportation systems, such as buses, bulletin boards, and bill boards, are just a few of the ways that the public can benefit from receiving information. The rural communities, in particular farm based communities, do not benefit from these luxuries.

Reporting Systems

The police and other authorities in rural Manitoba are very concerned and cooperative about the issue of sexual abuse by a relative. Logistics make it difficult for them to be as potentially effective as they can because of the difficulty in coordinating all the various authorities, as well as not being able to act beyond their jurisdiction (Fortune & Hormann, 1980; Butler, 1985).

### Disclosure

Families where sexual abuse by a relative occurs are bound by their ties of dependence, fear of separation, and their secrecy. If someone from the outside world penetrates their barriers and reveals their secret, their usual defense is denial. Often, the family unites in maintaining the secret, including the victim, who denies that the sexual abuse ever took place. When the victim refuses to disclose the sexual abuse, there is little that can be done unless there is evidence, which in most cases is difficult to come by (Renvoize, 1982).

### Reasons for Maintaining the Secret

There are many reasons why the victim may join forces with the family, and deny the sexual abuse. First, to reveal the secret means that the victim runs the risk of losing the one means of attention, warmth and affection, no matter how dysfunctional that affection is. On the other hand, many are not motivated to tell because they do not know or realize that sexual abuse by a relative is wrong, that it is sexual, or what it meant at the time of the incident(s) (Russell, 1986).

If the victim is removed from the family, it is likely that the victim will drift back to the family

where the sexual abuse occurred due to it's strong ties. If the perpetrator has been removed from the home, the victim runs the risk of being made to feel responsible for the absence of the father, the one who most likely supports the family financially. If the perpetrator has remained in the home, the victim will probably be re-victimized, and molested again. If the victim is restricted from returning home, she will be further alienated because she has been fairly isolated, and has not learned socialization skills beyond those of her family where the sexual abuse occurred (Renvoize, 1982).

Second, there is an incredible amount of pressure by the family to maintain the secret. It must be remembered that the victim's ties to the family are probably tighter than those within a family where there is no sexual abuse by a relative, therefore, the victim will resist disclosure and breaking those ties, feeling an allegiance to her family (Renvoize, 1982).

Third, despite the fact that family roles and boundaries are blurred in a family where sexual abuse by a relative occurs, each member plays a survival role in order to maintain some sort of balance within the home (Satir, 1991). If the sexual abuse is revealed, and the victim does not deny it, the victim must take

on a new role, that of the villain. In order to maintain whatever fragile equilibrium that exists within the family system, the other family members close the gap that the victim left, and continue living out their roles. The family can only become normal, normal from the perspective of the family where the sexual abuse occurs, if the victim withdraws the disclosure, once again, denying the sexual abuse (Renvoize, 1982).

Fear of punishment by the perpetrator and or someone else, including abandonment or rejection (Renvoize, 1982), as well as a desire to protect the perpetrator, or fear of hurting someone else is another motivation to maintain the secret. Self-blame can also make a victim feel too ashamed or guilty to tell. Victims often fear being blamed or of not being believed (Russell, 1986).

Victims often fear that the threats made by the perpetrator will be carried out. They may be very scared for a variety of reasons: not being believed and or being blamed; that the victim's father may want to physically harm the perpetrator, therefore, the victim ends up protecting the perpetrator; or, the victim does not want to disrupt or upset the members of the perpetrators family (Russell, 1986).

Aspects of Disclosure

Victims may disclose at various stages of their life. They may reveal the secret at the time of the first incident or soon afterward (17%), while others will tell someone at some later point (10%) (Russell, 1986). Many never reveal the secret themselves, yet they know that someone else had knowledge that sexual abuse by a relative had occurred (19%) (Russell, 1986). Through survey research it was found that only 5% of the cases specifically mentioned that they had not told anyone until the time of the research interview (Russell, 1986). These figures show that a high percentage of cases were known by someone else at the time of the sexual abuse, and yet the responsibility was left with the victim to fend for themselves.

When the victim does choose to reveal the secret, it may be for several reasons. One motivating factor is a change in the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. For example, a young girl may enter puberty, and her perpetrator may begin to demand intercourse. The perpetrator may also become more demanding to the point that the victim would rather risk retribution than submit. Finally, the victim may want to protect a younger, more helpless sibling who has the potential to become victimized (Herman, 1981).

On the other hand, the victim may carry the secret to her grave, as many do.

The family in which sexual abuse by a relative occurs is unfortunately not the only reason the victim fears exposure. As a result of bias and ignorance within the helping professions and the criminal justice system, the child protection agencies, law enforcement agencies, and the mental health professions have been unable to guarantee that their intervention will not be destructive to both the victim and the family (Herman, 1981).

Society can be cruel and unsupportive to the victims and their family without realizing that their support could actually be interpreted as condemnation for the victim, and support of the perpetrator, which in turn, supports the perpetuation of the cycle of sexual abuse by a relative. By disclosing the secret of sexual abuse, the victim challenges the traditional social value that the man has a right to do as he pleases within his own home. Indirectly and unintentionally, the community punishes the victim for having the audacity to accuse their father of such an act (Herman, 1981). This has been the case in some rural communities where the "response to discovered cases of incest was initially a punitive reaction,

followed by avoidance and inaction" (Moe & Moe, 1977, pp. 13-14, as cited in Herman, 1981, p. 129). The reaction of shock, outrage, and denial only further disrupts and threatens the family. This antagonizes the perpetrator, leaving the victim, who dared to defy the rules, even more at the mercy of the perpetrator (Herman, 1981).

When the victim decides to reveal the secret, her mother may not be her first choice as a confidante. The relationship between the mother and daughter may be too fragile, and the daughter may be too alienated from her mother to trust her. Many daughters believe that their mothers knew, or should have known, and thus, they bitterly resent them. Due to this frail relationship, she must find someone that she can confide in, and may need to go outside her immediate family (Herman, 1981).

Sexual abuse by a relative is commonly reported to a close friend, relative, neighbour, or social agency. If the child lives in a rural setting, reporting centres and child protection agencies may not be readily accessible to a child (Fortune & Hormann, 1980). If children are school age, their teacher or school counsellor may be a likely choice. Regardless of whether it is an agency or school, within the

province of Manitoba, under subsection 18(1) of The Act, adults have a legal obligation to report any known case of sexual abuse (Government of Manitoba, 1989).

#### Summary

Based on the review of literature, research supports the notion that sexual abuse by a relative is increasing (NCCAN, 1981, as cited in Russell, 1986; Rural Manitoba Project, 1991), and yet an extremely high percentage of sexual assaults remain unreported (Butler, 1985). In addition, various researchers have found significant results which indicate that sexual abuse by a relative is of special concern in the rural area (Summit & Kryso, 1978), particularly, the farm based rural areas (Finkelhor, 1979; Lukianowicz, 1972). Although Finkelhor found higher rates of sexual abuse by a relative (he used the term incest) in women with farm backgrounds, the sample was too small to pursue the analysis any further. Does this small sample reflect the unreported cases of sexual abuse by a relative that may be occurring in the rural, and farm communities?

Mennonites comprise a large portion of the rural, particularly the farm, population in Manitoba (Bond & Harvey, 1989). Block (1991) clearly indicated that the



rates of sexual abuse by a relative within the Mennonite communities in Winnipeg, Manitoba, mirror the rates found in other research studies (Finkelhor, 1979; 1986; Russell, 1986).

According to the literature mentioned, it can be suggested that Mennonite women living in rural Manitoba, particularly farms, may have experienced sexual abuse by a relative at rates equal to other populations. These assaults may be unreported due to the rural location, and isolation, which make disclosure that much more difficult to occur (Fortune and Hormann, 1980). These characteristics reinforce, and intensify the concern for victims of sexual abuse by a relative, their families, their community, and the issue of disclosure.

### Research Questions

#### Research Question I

Do the victims' decisions to disclose have any relation to the attitude and approach of the Mennonite church and family to sexual abuse by a relative?

#### Research Question II

Does isolation, as described in the literature review, have any relation to the victims' decisions to disclose?

Research Question III

Do the victims' decisions to disclose their sexual abuse by a relative have any relation to their knowledge of other victims of sexual abuse by a relative in the community?

Research Question IV

Do the victims' decisions to disclose their sexual abuse by a relative have any relation to their level of involvement with people or communities from outside their own?

Research Question V

What aspects/resources might be put in place to help the victims disclose?

### Chapter III

#### Methods

##### Design

##### Interviews

The data were obtained through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (FFI). FFI's were chosen for several reasons. It seems that there is no one specific method that has been found to be superior for all types of questions (Sudman & Bradburn, 1974, as cited in Finkelhor, 1986). The topic of sexual abuse seems to be unique though in that it is a special type of sensitive topic where FFI's lend themselves to being an effective mode of administration (Finkelhor, 1986).

FFI's provide time for building rapport and asking warm-up questions. For this reason, FFI's allow the interviews to be more successful in eliciting honest responses. An in-person interviewer may be better able to arrange, provide, and maintain the necessary privacy for the interview to be successful.

I believed that FFI's were the most ethical method considering the potential distress that the subject matter may elicit in some participants. When the respondent became distressed or upset, she was with a person who provided the necessary support that she

needed, and the presence of an interviewer may also have elicited frank and candid responses.

It is important to state that at the time of this study I had ten years of direct counselling experience in the area of sexual abuse and issues related to sexuality. I was the school counsellor and Specialty Therapist at Marymound School, which is a treatment facility for adolescents, and was employed with Marymound for seven years. I have counselled in other capacities as well, one of which was working with families in crisis at the Health Sciences Centre, and at the time of this study, I was counselling at the Women's Health Clinic. This particular research study was partial fulfilment for a Master of Education in the area of counselling.

The other advantage to FFI's is the message that they convey to the respondent regarding the topic of sexual abuse by a relative. FFI's convey the message that it is important, as well as acceptable, to talk about sexual abuse, and it provides the victim with a listener who is accepting and non-judgemental.

#### Interview Schedule

The interview schedule was a vital component to elicit frank responses and ensure support for the participants. There was one, two hour interview

conducted with each participant. The interview schedule that was followed was:

1. Provide 20 to 30 minutes for myself and the participant to relax and become comfortable with one another.
2. I asked the participant if she had any further questions regarding the interview, and whether or not she fully understood the interview protocol. If she said yes, I asked that she sign the consent form to tape record the interview.
3. I read the purpose, a brief introduction, and then asked a number of Warm Up Questions focusing on the participant's personal and family history (Appendix G).
4. I asked the Interview Questions (Appendix H).
5. Following the interview, there was a debriefing period. This enabled me to assess the participant's stability and level of stress, and allowed time for the participant to relax. By building in debriefing time, the participant knew that they were not obligated to leave following the interview, knowing they would be able to spend time with a supportive person.
6. Prior to the interview, I suggested that the therapist be available for any necessary

debriefing, should the participant feel a need to debrief further. Following the interview, should the therapist not be available, the participant was provided with a list of resources that she could contact for immediate support (Appendix I).

7. I obtained a mailing address to contact the participant so that she received a copy of the results.

### Participants

#### Criteria for Participant Selection

A minimum of eight participants were selected, and interviewed. The criteria for participant selection was based on four requirements:

1. They had been raised in a home where at least the father, or both, of their parents belong(ed) to a Mennonite church.
2. They had been raised in rural Manitoba, but do not have to presently live there.
3. They had been victims of sexual abuse by a relative, as defined within this research study.
4. They were females 18 years of age and older.

In the original proposal, one of the criteria proposed was that the participants be between the ages of 18 and 30 years of age. The purpose of the age

restriction was to gather information that reflected as current a situation as possible. Since I was contacting my subjects through their therapists, and I was only interviewing women who had been, or were currently in therapy, I was having a difficult time finding women within the required age category. Based on this experience, I decided to remove that restriction and invited women of all ages to participate in the study.

#### Selection of Therapists

The sample was obtained through clinical lists. The snowballing method was employed to gather names of therapists. I chose this method to include all therapists rather than limit the list to psychologists. I contacted five therapists by telephone, and asked each of them for the names of five additional therapists. This approach generated a list of 36 therapists practicing in Manitoba, including the five therapists I originally contacted.

#### Selection of Sample

I contacted the initial five therapists by telephone, introduced my research study, and asked if they were interested in taking part in the study. I then sent them an information package containing all the necessary information for both themselves and the

clients they felt met the criteria. I did not contact the other therapists by telephone. Instead, I distributed a research package to five different therapists every two weeks until I received at least eight participants.

The package included (a) a written letter of explanation (Appendix A and B), (b) the phone number of the researcher, (c) a reply form (Appendix C), and (d) the information that they distributed to clients who met the selection criteria (Appendix D). The initial five therapists that I contacted by telephone received a package that included the cover letter in Appendix A. All other packages included the cover letter in Appendix B.

The therapist selected participants based on the criteria set forth in the study, as well as their expert opinion and knowledge of the emotional health of the participant. The therapist suggested whether he/she felt that the participant was capable of taking part in the study and was able to cope with the interview, although the client ultimately had the final decision. A reminder letter was mailed to each therapist two weeks following the initial mailing (Appendix E).

When the clients had been selected, the therapist



informed them of the research study and the interview, presented them with a letter of explanation (Appendix D), and asked if they would agree to be interviewed. The letter informed them of the purpose of the study, the name of the researcher (myself), and my telephone number. This provided the client with the opportunity to speak with me, and still have the option to withdraw from the study, having never revealed their identity. Once the client agreed to participate in the research study, the participant and I arranged a meeting time that was suitable for her, and a meeting place where she felt safe. When I spoke with each therapist, I asked permission to use their office space for the interview. The therapist's office seemed like a logical location based on safety, confidentiality, and that the client may feel grounded and comfortable in a familiar setting.

### Instruments

#### Questionnaire

The questionnaires in Appendix G and H were employed in all the interviews. The interview began with the Warm-Up Questionnaire (Appendix G). These questions focused on the subject's family history, and acted as a way of building rapport. The remainder of

the Interview Questionnaire was comprised of semi-structured, open-ended questions (Appendix H).

#### Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot study with one subject. This subject fit all the criteria of the study. I used a stop watch during the pilot interviews to time the length of the interview. I also examined the data to see if the interview questions focused on the aim of the research questions.

#### Procedure

##### Ethics

Due to the sensitive nature of the interviews, I conducted all the interviews myself, as well as transcribed all the interviews. This eliminated the need to train and educate interviewers.

I ensured that the participant received the necessary privacy for the interview to take place. I also tried to accommodate the participant as much as possible, and met in a place where she felt safe. I asked each of the therapists if they would be willing to make their office available for the interview. The locations were specific for each of the participants. I will provide a complete description of the locations in Chapter IV.

Should the participant choose to terminate the interview either by stating that she would like to terminate it, by requesting that the tape recorder be turned off, or by indicating in any other way that she did not wish to continue the interview, her request was honoured. Should the participant ask to have the tape recorder turned off, I ensured that her request was on tape. The point at which the tape recorder was turned off signified the end of that interview. I did not want the participant to feel pressured in any way to continue, nor feel guilty that she terminated the interview. I wanted to respect the wishes of the participant, and support her decision. For the purpose of collecting exit information, once the tape recorder was turned off, I asked why she requested that the tape recorder be turned off.

Prior to the interview, I suggested that the participant's therapist be available for any necessary debriefing, should the participant feel a need to debrief further. Following the interview, if the therapist was not available immediately, the participant was provided with a list of resources that she could contact for immediate support (Appendix I). This information was provided to all participants, including those who chose to terminate the interview.

Recording

I explained the interview protocol as outlined in the cover letter to the participants (Appendix D). I again repeated the outline, and the purpose of the study to the participant.

I then obtained permission from the participant to audiotape the interview, and she then signed the consent form agreeing to be interviewed, and audio taped. Refer to Appendix D for the consent form.

Confidentiality

In order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all the audiotapes and transcripts were coded, and the participants' names were never used. Any identifying names or places were also coded. I transcribed all of the audiotapes myself. I was the only person to hear the audiotapes, and read the transcripts.

Following the completion of the study, the audiotapes were destroyed. The transcripts will remain in my possession for at least five years following the publication of this study for the purpose of future research.

## Chapter IV

### Description of the Participants

#### General Information

##### Number of Participants

There were a total of 10 women contacted for interviews, and nine of those women completed an interview. One woman had agreed to be interviewed, yet due to other commitments in her life, we were unable to arrange a suitable meeting time. Of the nine women that were interviewed, I have chosen to use eight of the interviews, one of which is the pilot interview.

The interview that I have chosen to not use did not meet all the required criteria. At the time of the interview I discovered that the participant's perpetrator was not a family member. I gave her the choice as to whether or not she would like to continue on with the interview, and she chose to complete the interview. Initially I felt that the interview would be beneficial in that the woman was 20 years old and her experience would closely reflect a current situation. Upon closer examination of the transcript, it became clear that because her experience was with a non-family member, it was in a different context and therefore was not suitable to be used as part of the

data.

#### Location of Interviews

When I presented my research to counsellors and therapists, I explained that I would be willing to conduct the interviews in a setting and location that was suitable and comfortable for the participant. All of the therapists were willing to allow the interview to take place in their office, yet due to limited availability of their office space, only one of the interviews was conducted in the therapist's office. Of the other seven interviews, three of the interviews were conducted in my home; three were conducted in the participants' home; and, one was in the participant's work place.

#### Anonymity

Some of the participants were very concerned about their anonymity and that others not know of their participation in this study. Their concern stemmed from their fear of their family members finding out about the interview, or that others may recognize them or their family. To alleviate their fears and concerns I gave them the choice of where to conduct the interview, and I spent considerable time speaking with some of the women on the telephone, reassuring them of their anonymity and privacy. Other women were more

open, and less concerned about their anonymity.

Part of their concern and need for anonymity is that the Mennonite community is a tightly knit community where many people know one another. The nature of a rural setting is also closely knit where individuals and families are often aware of each others private affairs and issues. Together, the characteristics of these two groups and settings make it imperative that the participants remain anonymous, and not reveal who they are for fear of repercussions from and, or, for the community or their family.

In the following descriptions, I have used pseudonyms for each of the participants and any other people who were mentioned in the interview. Any names, places, or information that may identify who they or their family are, have not been mentioned.

All of the women came from rural communities throughout Manitoba, yet the descriptions that follow may sound very similar. I will not reveal the names or locations of their home community, yet I will describe the setting as best I can without revealing them.

#### Individual Descriptions

##### Ann

Ann is a 43 year old woman who is divorced, and

has three sons and two grandchildren. She is the third born child of seven, with two brothers and four sisters, and her two brothers are the youngest children in the family.

She was born in a town in rural Manitoba, and grew up in several small towns throughout Manitoba. There was one particular town where Ann spent most of her growing years, and her family lived in two different houses while living there. The first house was right in town with other houses close by, while the second house was more isolated and located on the outskirts of town.

Ann lived in that particular community until the age of 17 at which time she married a man who was also Mennonite, and together they resided not far from where Ann grew up. This was a difficult marriage for Ann because the abusive dynamics that she experienced in her family of origin also existed in her husband's family, and although she no longer lived in the same town as her parents, she did not live far from them. After experiencing further sexual abuse in her marriage, Ann eventually separated and divorced her husband, moved to another province for several years, and now resides in a larger, urban community in Manitoba.



Ann's parents are now divorced, and they no longer reside in the community to which I previously referred to. Her mother left her father several years ago and this was the motivating reason for her to leave the community. Her father has lived in several locations and has been very transient, and he never remarried. Her mother now resides in a larger community in Manitoba, she remarried, and is now divorced from her second husband.

Both of Ann's parent's were Mennonite Brethren, yet they chose to leave the church when Ann was approximately two or three years of age. To the best of her recollection, the reason they left the church was because "they were having a very hard time being accepted." They joined the Protestant United church and Ann has never identified herself as Mennonite, although her extended family identifies itself as Mennonite. When asked how she would define being Mennonite, Ann used the word hypocrite, feeling that there was considerable conflict and inconsistency within the community.

Ann was sexually abused by nine male members of her family. All of her perpetrators were from her father's side of the family, and they included her father, several of his brothers, and a few cousins.

To the best of her recollection, Ann believes that the sexual abuse began around the age of two, and ended at the age of 14. The abuse ended when she bought a lock for the inside of her bedroom door, preventing her perpetrators from entering her bedroom at night.

She was also sexually abused by her father-in-law and her husband's uncle after she was married. The abuse by her father-in-law ended when Ann's mother-in-law witnessed him abusing Ann, and the abuse by her uncle ended when Ann and her husband divorced and she severed her ties with his family.

Ann disclosed for the first time as an adult. She disclosed to her husband.

Ann now maintains a professional career and has spent many years focusing on self care and growth to heal the pain of her abuse. Following the interview, Ann and I remained in contact. Her father corresponded with her a few times after the interview, and she shared those as well as previous correspondences with me. She also shared of her interactions with her family members, and talked about the difficulties she was experiencing.

Beth

Beth is a 37 year old woman, who has been in a partnership for nine years, and does not have any

children. She is one of 14 children and she is the second eldest child. She has three brothers, nine sisters, and one sister who died.

Beth was born in a town in rural Manitoba, and was raised on a farm in Manitoba. The farm could be described as a family farm where more than one family resided on the land, and Beth's family moved onto their own farm when she was approximately five years old. At the age of 17 she moved away from that particular community to attend a Mennonite boarding school.

Beth's parents are still married to one another, and continue to live at the same farm location. They also spend time at a second home outside of Manitoba. Both her parents are Mennonite and they have always belonged to the General Conference.

Beth's perpetrator is her uncle, which is her father's brother. Her uncle was one of the family members who resided on the family farm when she was very young.

She is unable to determine at what age the sexual abuse began, yet she is certain that she was of pre-school age, and possibly as young as two years old. She is unable to determine at what age the abuse ended, yet she suspects that her family's decision to leave the family farm and live independent of their

relatives, may have been related to her abuse. She disclosed to her mother as a very young child, yet there was no action taken and the sexual abuse continued for many years. In addition to sexual abuse, Beth endured physical and emotional abuse by her father, and she spoke of comparing "our welts and our black spots on our legs and beatings and stuff" with her cousin.

Beth sees herself as being identified as Mennonite in certain circles and circumstances, and feels that she is definitely Mennonite when it comes to her ethnicity and certain traditions. She does not attend a Mennonite church and she used the term "post-Mennonite", to describe herself. Although she was born and raised as Mennonite, and still carries her Mennonite birth name, she has spent considerable time exploring her spiritual roots and existence.

Beth no longer resides in the area in which she was raised, and presently lives in a larger community in Manitoba. Following the interview, Beth contacted me a few times. She shared how she felt empowered by the research interview, and that the interview was conducted in a gentle and supportive manner. She also contacted me to pursue a support network with other women like herself who have gone through the healing

process but would like to continue to meet in an informal manner.

Susan

Susan is a 32 year old woman who is married with two daughters. She has two brothers and one sister, as well as three step brothers and three step sisters. She is the third born of her natural siblings, and is the third youngest of the ten children.

Susan was born and raised in a town in rural Manitoba, and she lived there until the age of ten. It was then that her family moved to a farm that was located approximately four miles from the nearest town. Susan now resides in that town with her husband and children.

Susan's natural father died when she was seven years of age. Shortly after, her mother remarried and the family moved to the farm location previously described, where they lived until her step-father received a job opportunity in another community, at which time they moved. Her parents are now separated and living in another community. It was her step-father that sexually abused Susan. Several years ago she confronted her step-father, which led to the separation of her parents.

Susan was first sexually abused at the age of 11

and she was 19 years old when it ended. When asked what ended the sexual abuse, she could only speculate that because she had lost her will to fight, she was no longer appealing to her perpetrator. She had also become very transient, moving around to several locations to attend school, and was no longer accessible.

Susan disclosed to her mother as a young child. Now, as an adult, Susan is aware that following her disclosure her mother confronted her step-father, but he denied the abuse saying that Susan was "making a mountain out of a mole hill." Susan recognized that as a child, her mother believed her disclosure, yet her mother was also afraid of Susan's step-father. Even though her mother confronted her step-father, because the sexual abuse continued and she was not protected, she believed that no attempts were made to stop the sexual abuse.

Susan's mother joined the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (E. M. C.) when she married her first husband, and both her step-father and mother were Mennonite and belonged to the E. M. C. church. Her step-father did not have strong ties to the church, having had many conflicts with them while he was a member. He was eventually excommunicated from the E.

M. C. church for reasons that Susan did not explain, and he joined other churches and faiths, not being fully committed to one particular church. Her parents now belong to the Baptist church.

Susan has since withdrawn from the Mennonite church as well. She considers herself only partially Mennonite now because she is no longer affiliated with the Mennonite church, yet still considers it her heritage. She chose to join her husband's church when they married and is now a member of the Baptist church. She now resides in the town that was close to the farm she grew up on.

Cindy

Cindy is a 24 year old single woman. She has two children, neither of whom are presently living with her. She has one son who is toddler age, and one daughter who she gave birth to when she was a young adolescent. Cindy was impregnated by her father, resulting in the birth of her daughter. Cindy's father raised this child as his daughter, and Cindy referred to her as her sister. This was a very painful issue to talk about and she has blocked the birth experience from her memory. Cindy has two brothers and one sister, and she is the youngest of the four.

Cindy was born in a town in rural Manitoba and

grew up in several towns throughout Manitoba. One of the towns where the majority of her sexual abuse took place was in a village setting with a population of less than 300 people. She described the village as a place where "everyone knew everyone and everything about everybody." The family moved from the village when Cindy was nine, and as she remembers it, they moved because "...my mom took me away saying I was a vindictive, manipulative, little bitch and I was driving her crazy and was heading her towards a nervous breakdown cause I'd always run to my grandma, cause my grandma lived right next door,...."

From there, the family lived in several other rural locations; sometimes in town and other times on a farm. When asked what motivated her family to move from one of the town locations, she said that she felt that the pressure was becoming too stressful for her parents because they sensed that the community was talking about them. It is important to note that if the community did know that the abuse was taking place, they did not report it. On the other hand, Cindy's parents may have been very paranoid, and moved to avoid being caught.

Cindy lived throughout rural Manitoba until she was 14 years of age at which time she moved to an urban



setting and received treatment and support for the abuse she had endured. Her move to an urban setting was the result of her disclosing sexual abuse. This was not her first disclosure.

Her first disclosure took place at the age of four while living in a small village. She disclosed to her maternal grandmother. "...I told my grandmother. My grandmother told me not to let him because it was bad....And being heavily Mennonite, you just don't say those things (issues related to sexual abuse). And I had hernia surgery when I was three, and I distinctly remember screaming, like not wanting to let the doctor touch me, you know. So I guess I was giving off my own messages, but nobody ever really picked them up....So in my own way I was saying something without really using words."

Cindy was sexually abused by both her mother and her father. She was also abused by non-family members. She is uncertain as to when the abuse started and ended, and the memories are blurred, yet she feels that her father sexually abused her from the age of two and a half to 14 years old. Her mother began sexually abusing her when she was almost five years of age, and it ended when Cindy was seven or eight years old. She does not know why the abuse ended by her mother. The

abuse by her father ended when she disclosed at the age of 14. The authorities became involved and Cindy was removed from her family. Cindy's parents are now divorced.

Cindy's mother was Mennonite, as was her maternal family, and although her father was Irish, he too was Mennonite. They belonged to the Sommerfeld church, but they no longer attend the Mennonite church. Cindy last remembers attending church when she was five years old, yet has very strong memories of her maternal grandmother's Christian beliefs and of her teachings. Cindy is uncertain as to why they left the church, yet she suspects that her parents' abusive practices were not accepted and they needed to be more private.

Cindy was raised Mennonite, but does not consider herself to be Mennonite any more. She respects what her grandmother says, but she feels that her other Mennonite relatives were condemning of her. She defined being Mennonite as hypocritical, and feels that being Mennonite is sometimes embarrassing.

When I arrived at Cindy's home to conduct the interview, we realized that we knew each other. I gave her the option to refrain from being interviewed, yet she said she became more comfortable once she realized that she would not be speaking to a complete stranger.

Following the interview, Cindy and I spent some time visiting and she shared a wealth of information concerning her abuse, her family, and her therapeutic process. Over the years, Cindy has expressed herself through writing and she shared some of her poems as well as some of her drawings. She also shared her family photo album which enabled me to formulate a clearer picture of her family.

#### Karen

Karen is a 33 year old woman who is married and does not have any children. She is one of 11 children with seven brothers and nine sisters. She is the third youngest (the ninth) child, and six brothers and two sisters are older than she.

Karen was born in a town in rural Manitoba and was raised on a farm location close to that town. From the time she completed high school until the age of 28, she was rather transient, moving back and forth from her home community, to various other cities and communities to attend school. When she left her community at age 28, she moved to an urban setting, knowing that her original home could not offer her employment opportunities, and she was not comfortable with the community.

Karen was sexually abused by four of her older

brothers. The oldest brother is ten years her senior, and the youngest brother is five years her senior. Overall, she was sexually abused from the age of six to 13. Two brothers abused her when she was younger, and her two older brothers abused her when she was older. She is unable to distinguish when each of the abusive situations began and ended. She is uncertain as to what ended the abuse, yet recalls that she became more resistant and less compliant.

Karen disclosed at the age of 13 to a woman who attended her church. She clearly recalls disclosing due to intense feelings of guilt. The person she disclosed to did not act on the information she received.

Karen's mother died five years ago, and her father has since left the farm. He now resides on a small acreage close to their family farm. Both of Karen's parents belonged to, and her father presently belongs to, the Evangelical Mennonite Conference.

Karen's husband is non-Mennonite and she has left the Mennonite church. From a therapeutic perspective, she is focusing on gaining an understanding and insight, as well as resolving some of her feelings toward what she termed as "the unhealthy aspects of being a Mennonite." She is very ashamed of the fact

that she is Mennonite, yet in the final end, Karen believes that she will always be Mennonite and will eventually be comfortable with that. For now, she describes herself as a "recovering Mennonite", fighting for a voice to speak with and be heard, and to be recognized for her importance.

### Jennifer

Jennifer is a 40 year old woman who is married, and has two daughters and a son. She is the eldest of four children. She has one brother who is four years younger than herself, and two sisters who are 12 and 13 years younger than herself.

Jennifer was born and raised in rural Manitoba, and for a brief time, she and her family resided outside of Manitoba. Her family was very transient and lived in six different locations, and they always resided in town settings. There is one particular town in Manitoba that Jennifer considered home because it was there that she completed high school and established friendships. She graduated from high school at the age of 17, moved to a different location to continue her schooling, and got married. Jennifer and her family now reside in an urban setting in Manitoba in an area which she did not live in while growing up.

Jennifer's mother still resides in the town she called home, and her father resided there as well until the time of his death six years ago. Her mother remarried and is now separated.

Jennifer was sexually abused by her father and she is in the process of regaining her memories of sexual abuse by a woman. She feels that she knows who that woman is, but is not ready to definitely say who it was. (During the interview, Jennifer did say who she suspects the woman is, but at her request, I will not reveal the nature of the relationship).

The abuse by the woman began around the age of three or four, although she is in the process of regaining those memories. The sexual abuse by her father began around the age of ten and she suspects that it ended when she was approximately 12 or 13 years old. She does not recall what ended the abuse.

Jennifer disclosed for the first time as an adult. She disclosed to her pastor's wife; the pastor of the Alliance church she presently attends.

Jennifer's paternal grandparent's were Mennonite Brethren and her maternal grandparent's were Sommerfeld. Her parents attended a General Conference church, yet they never held church membership. Jennifer believed that her parents were more liberal

than her extended family, who she described as being very conservative.

Jennifer is a member of the General Conference church, although she no longer attends. She requested a release years ago but was denied. She now attends the Alliance church in her home location.

Jennifer expressed considerable anger towards the Mennonite community. When she was younger and attending church, she was hurt by the people of the Mennonite community and viewed them as "very legalistic". She described them as a religious community rather than a Christian community, and one that is filled with hypocrisy. From her perspective, their concern for rules, their image, and the way they present to others is more important than for who God really is and their concern for others.

#### Sarah

Sarah is a 38 year old woman who is divorced with two sons. Sarah is the youngest of five children. She has three older brothers, with the oldest being 12 years her senior, and she has one sister who is four years her senior.

Sarah was born in a town in rural Manitoba. She has lived in four different rural locations which could be described as either town or village settings. She

lived in the first location until the age of two, the next until the age of four, the next until the age of twelve, and then in the final town until adulthood, at which time she moved to a larger, urban community. Her parents also moved to the same urban community, and her father died four years ago.

The sexual abuse that Sarah endured took place in the village that they lived in when she was between the ages of four and twelve. This is a very small community with a population of approximately 200 people.

She was sexually abused by two brothers and a cousin. Her memories date back to the age of six, yet she believes that the abuse may have started at a younger age. The abuse continued until the age of 14, at which time Sarah started to date her future husband.

Sarah disclosed to her mother when she was in grade two. Her disclosure was not believed nor acted upon, and she remained silent until the age of thirty at which time she disclosed to a close male friend.

Sarah's mother, and all but one sibling, identify as Mennonite and both her parents belonged to, and her mother continues to belong to the Bergthaler church. Sarah does not consider herself Mennonite because she has never been baptised Mennonite. To her, being



Mennonite means hypocrisy, and she said that she has no respect for the Mennonite church.

Mary

Mary is a 34 year old woman who is married and has three sons. She is the fifth child out of seven children. She has four brothers; three older and one younger than she. The youngest brother is four years younger than she, and her eldest brother is about seven years her senior. She has two sisters, one older and one younger, and the three are all seven years apart.

Mary was born in a town in rural Manitoba, and was raised on a farm ten miles from the nearest town. She resided on the farm until the age of 19, leaving to get away from her parents, particularly her father, and the community. Mary moved to a larger urban community, and her parents continue to reside on the family farm.

Mary was sexually abused by her father and one brother. Her brother is approximately five years older than she, and he is the third born of the children. The sexual abuse by her brother occurred from the age of 10 to 11, and the sexual abuse by her father occurred when she was 14 years of age. The abuse by her brother ended because Mary had started to menstruate. She verbally expressed a fear of becoming pregnant and became more resistant. The sexual abuse

by her father occurred once when she was 14. He did not physically touch her, yet he made sexual comments to her about her body. She was in her bedroom changing her clothes, he walked into her bedroom, cornered her in her closet, and commented on her breasts and the sexual development of her body. The sexual abuse was a one time occurrence, and it was a traumatic experience with lasting effects. The extreme physical abuse by her father continued toward Mary and her other siblings.

Mary disclosed for the first time two and half years prior to her participation in this research study. She disclosed to her husband and she has been involved in counselling since that time.

Both Mary and her parents belong to the Evangelical Mennonite Conference, although they belong to different churches. Even though Mary belongs to the Evangelical Mennonite Conference church, she does not always feel like a Mennonite. She identifies from a cultural sense, but not always from a biblical or theological sense, and believes that the Mennonite church and community need to grow and become more open-minded.

## Chapter V

### Results and Discussion

This chapter will address four of the five research questions. The fifth research question will be addressed in the following chapter. I have chosen to discuss the fifth question in a separate chapter because the question elicited responses that were direct recommendations to issues raised in this research study. Rather than repeating the recommendations in two chapters, I have combined the participants' responses and the recommendations into one chapter.

#### Data Analysis

Following the audio taped interview, each tape was transcribed into written form. I then went through the data as the responses corresponded to each of the research questions, and examined each of the responses to each of the research questions, examining frequencies, and looking for trends, commonalities and differences between the interviews. As I analyzed the data in each of the interviews, I found that there were similarities in the responses to each of the research questions. Based on these similarities, I identified common themes that I saw emerge. I will discuss these

themes as they correspond to each research question.

#### Research Question I

Do the victims' decisions to disclose have any relation to the attitude and approach of the Mennonite church and family to sexual abuse by a relative?

All of the women felt that the attitude and approach of the Mennonite church and family to sexual abuse by a relative did not foster, encourage, or support disclosures. For most of the women, this attitude affected their decision to disclose, or as some of the women phrased it, to not disclose. Others felt that although the beliefs of the church were non-supportive to them and to a large extent those beliefs contributed to their continued silence, it was not the dominant reason that motivated them to disclose or not.

They all viewed the attitudes and beliefs of the church to be the same as those presented in their home by their family. Therefore, as I describe the responses, rather than differentiating between the attitudes of the church and of the family, I will speak of them as one.

#### Perception of Sexual Abuse

All the women believed that the church was close-minded to the issue of sexual abuse. Mary presently

attends an Evangelical Mennonite Conference church and based on her observations of the church community, she believes that they are still very close minded to the issue of sexual abuse. "But now, even in our church there are people that are closed to it. They don't understand it because they don't want to understand it. They don't want to talk about it, and so they just ignore it and then they make comments that hurt people who have been abused." Mary did not provide any specific examples of the hurtful comments she described.

Not only was the issue of sexual abuse not discussed or mentioned, it was viewed as being covered up. "People should know that people are hiding behind this church and their bibles and everyone else who is pretending to be the pillars of the community are not, you know" (Ann).

The participants also reported that sexual abuse was portrayed by the Mennonite community to be non-existent. "The church does not want to admit that sexual abuse exists, but would rather believe that it is a problem that only exists in core area Winnipeg." Karen continued by stating that she believes that avoidance of the whole issue is currently the defense mechanism of the church. "It is considered an

unspeakable sin, yet you just don't talk about it."

This belief eliminated the option of disclosure. The women did not believe that disclosing was an option because if the church and community did not believe that it was happening, then they did not think they would ever be believed. They also questioned whether their experience would be defined as sexual abuse because they had been led to believe that it did not occur in their community; therefore, what they were experiencing was not sexual abuse.

There was also the perception that sexual abuse was equated with a violent rape, and if anything less violent or overt occurred, such as the perpetrator exposing him/herself or staring at and commenting on a child's genitals, then it was not sexual abuse. Mary's father walked into her bedroom while she was changing her clothes. She was partially clothed when he entered her bedroom, cornered her in her closet, and made sexual comments with regard to her breasts and the development of her body. He did not physically touch her. She was 14 years old at the time of this incident. "They perceive sex abuse as someone who's been violently raped. As if you have to really do something violent, you know. Something super, super violent in order for it so be sex abuse. They don't

understand that a parent can violate a child just be doing what my father did to me. And they don't understand how it can corrupt your mind, your thinking, and how it can corrupt the parenting and your marriage relationship."

This perception created considerable confusion because most of the women knew what rape was yet they did not know what sexual abuse was. The church and families did not acknowledge the sexual abuse, and because a girl was not being raped, then she perceived the sexual abuse as not being wrong.

#### Gender Roles and the Perception of Women

The way the Mennonites viewed sex and the human body profoundly affected many of the women and their decision to disclose. The abuse affected their sexual identity and their identity as a whole, and the participants believed that their perceptions were amplified by being raised in a Mennonite community. Beth described how she perceived the role of women in relation to men and sex. "I mean basically it was always like sex was something vulgar and you just put up with it. It was a man's thing and it wasn't something that was, I mean just a really bizarre way of looking at the body....I mean there's a separateness between spiritual life and physical body, and all that

stuff I think profoundly affected my identity, my sexual identity and then my whole experience with the child abuse, and it just exacerbated it profoundly, to have grown up in a Mennonite community and in a place where women are separate from men, and women are basically the workhorses....The level of Mennonite women in the church and in the family, very much affected how I survived and who I've become."

The roles are very stereotypical and rigid where the parents modelled very traditional roles to their children. Sarah described the gender roles that were portrayed in her family. "There was nothing to deal with sexuality. You know, I don't even know if I ever heard the word sex. You know, girls cook and clean and do those kinds of things and boys drive tractors and trucks. Very stereotypical. But, I mean I never translated that into sexuality."

Based on the experiences of the participants, the Mennonite community viewed all abuse as the responsibility of the woman and not the perpetrator. According to Karen, "They see women as being responsible for whatever abuse they experienced. They dress in some provocative way or their behaviour was provocative, so the women are responsible for it so men don't have to take any responsibility for it."



Karen shared an experience she had while in church. "I had a woman tell me that I was dressed immorally. She had seen a man looking at my legs in the church service, and I was causing him problems, and her own husband had hung his head during the whole church service cause he didn't want to look at my legs. I was responsible for their problems. That happened three years ago. Like it's just this fall it all of a sudden clicked into place, my God, he made me responsible for what their problem was."

Karen explained how she believes that the Mennonite community focuses the responsibility and blame on the victim rather than recognizing that it is a community issue. "It's the victim who has a problem, and I really think that whole attitude needs to be changed in the sense it's a family problem, and I think it's also a community problem." This attitude implies that sexual abuse is an individual's problem, specifically the victim's problem, and this rationale is consistent with that described by Meiselman (1978).

The Mennonite church functions in a patriarchal manner, although the degree to which the patriarchy exists varies between churches and conferences. "The Mennonite church is a very, very, very male dominated society and I think women such as I are simply seen as

angry, hysterical women and you don't have to listen to them. They have nothing to say. I think men, they would never admit to this, but this is so damned obvious I think, women are property. Women are things that are just, she's my wife. She belongs to me. She's this quiet submissive person who sort of does what I want. So in that sense a man has whatever rights he wants to do with this woman that he owns and he so chooses" (Karen).

Based on the interviews, women and children are not viewed as equals within the Mennonite community, and their voice and opinion are not valued and respected the way a man's views are. According to Karen, "I think this thing about the angry, hysterical woman is really going to slow down this whole thing about talking, bringing about sexual abuse out into the open because first of all they don't have to listen to a woman. A woman isn't supposed to speak up, and secondly, if that woman is at all angry, then she's just emotionally hysterical at that time. She's not to be listened to. And the family, I mean, to me it's virtually the same thing." Beth added to this by acknowledging, "...just how little respect we give children's voices..." and there is a need to abolish attitudes such as "...children should be seen and not

heard."

The imbalance of power among family members is prevalent in families where sexual abuse by a relative occurs. In a family where sexual abuse by a relative occurs, men generally hold a position of power and dominance, leaving women and children in a less powerful position (Thorman, 1983). Based on the experiences of the participants, women and children are perceived as being less powerful than men within the Mennonite community.

The existence of a patriarch and a patriarchal system in a family where sexual abuse by a relative occurs is consistent with the findings of researchers such as Butler (1985), Gil (1988), Herman (1981), and Thorman (1983). The patriarchal system exists not only in individual families, but according to the interviews, throughout a large portion of the Mennonite community.

An unequal distribution of power among family members, as well as a patriarchal system, are both commonly found in Mennonite families and communities. I would be concerned as to whether the power imbalance and patriarchal system that is reported by the participants, increases the vulnerability of women and children in Mennonite families to sexual abuse by a

family member. I would also be concerned about the degree to which the victim feels powerless to disclose and the extreme silence that results from their powerless feelings. The power of the patriarch and the inability of the "submissive mother" to protect her daughter (Herman, 1981) provide little to no support to create an environment safe enough for disclosure.

The denial of it's existence, as well as the belief that sexual abuse must be a violent act, minimizes all other experiences. This belief also inhibits the victim from disclosing. The stereotypical traditional roles, the lack of talk about sex and sexuality, and the perception of women by the Mennonite church and family made it very difficult for women to disclose that they were being sexually abused.

#### Pacifism and Family Violence

Pacifism and Being Passive. The Mennonite belief system is based on Christianity and Mennonites lead a peaceful life style that is simple, conservative and incorporates the philosophy of non-violence into all aspects of their life. Mennonites do not typically take part in the military or any type of military action, and some Mennonites choose to not take legal action against one another. (Sharp, 1973; Yoder, 1983). This belief is clearly not carried out in all

Mennonite homes and families of the women I interviewed.

Beth shared how "...husbands watched soldiers rape their wives, and they said 'Well, we can't do anything because I'm a pacifist.'" There is a difference between being a pacifist and being passive, although many of the women experienced pacifism in a way other than the way Mennonites originally intended it to be. For example, for the participants, the whole belief of being a pacifist was translated into being passive and submissive. By watching their mothers fulfil the role of "passive" women in a male dominated home, the daughters also learned to not challenge the male family members, which were in many cases, their perpetrators. As mentioned previously, "submissive mothers" were unable to protect their daughters and children, nor were they able to convey a message of safety and support should a disclosure take place.

According to Herman (1981), women who have been victims of sexual abuse by a relative, and have not received treatment, are less likely to protect their daughters when they themselves are victims of sexual abuse. Their inability to protect their daughters stems from seeing themselves in their children, and identifying with their own feelings of powerlessness

during the time of their own sexual abuse rather than on the immediate needs of their children. This raises the concern that if Mennonite women are as powerless as the participants described, and that they adhere to the rules set by the patriarch in the home, the possibility exists that many of them may also be silent victims who have never disclosed. In addition, if their child discloses sexual abuse by a relative to them, those mothers are less likely to take action and challenge the perpetrator and protect the child (Herman, 1981).

Other Forms of Violence. Most of the women also experienced forms of violence other than sexual abuse within their home. Many of them endured emotional abuse, extreme physical abuse, ritual abuse, and lived in alcoholic homes. They experienced this chaos to the extent that they did not discuss the violence because to them, it was the norm.

Beth spoke of being aware of physical violence in other homes, and she and her friends shared experiences with one another. "I'm thinking of Mennonite boarding school, how liberating it was to be with other Mennonite kids who talked about all the violence in their families, and that it was really normal. That we felt normal being in a totally Mennonite commune - like school, and realizing how much our stories were so

similar."

This is very confusing because if the community believes in pacifism and not harming one another, how is family violence acceptable and justified? Does non-violent action only apply to military situations, or situations in relation to a political or grander scale, or has pacifism ceased to be relevant to present day Mennonites? If the violence is in fact justified to the extent that it is viewed as the norm, I would be concerned as to why sexual abuse would not be acceptable to talk about as well. To be violent is just as deviant as sexual abuse, yet sexual abuse is not disclosed nor talked about, even amongst close friends.

#### Family Response to Disclosures

Several of the women disclosed to their family or close friends, either in a direct manner where they specifically said what was happening to them, or in an indirect manner where they acted sad or in a way that would invite this person to probe about their change in behaviour and attitude. Some of those disclosures were made to their mothers.

Five of the participants that I interviewed disclosed as children or shortly after their first incident. According to Russell, (1986) the first

disclosure often takes place shortly after the first incident of sexual abuse. Despite the fact that they disclosed almost at the onset of sexual abuse, there was no action taken at the time to protect the participants from further abuse. For many of the participants, this response to their disclosure reinforced their need to remain silent, some for as long as the next 25 years.

Sarah described her experience with regard to her first disclosure. "There were all kinds of things you talked about. There were all kinds of things you didn't talk about. And I think that most of my mother's reaction to my disclosure to her was directly related to a Mennonite, religious upbringing, that you didn't talk about sex. You didn't talk about sexuality. You didn't mention the word breasts or vagina or any of those things and God, I didn't even know what a vagina was till I moved to \_\_\_\_\_, and somebody told me about it and I started to think that was really bizarre, you know."

Beth recalls disclosing to her mother as a young child because she believed that her mother was "powerful" and disclosed based on "...the belief that there was something she could do about it (sexual abuse) to make it stop." Beth perceived her mother as



being powerful because she had been led to believe that her mother had a direct line to God through her prayers. "Later I found out, you know, I looked at my life and it's one of the ways that my mother really controlled us. It was very positive and there, but it was also very destructive where all her children have moved out of their own voices." As adults now, Beth's mother suggested that she "...just get on with her life because it (sexual abuse) had happened so long ago, and to just forget about it." It is important to note that as a child, Beth perceived her mother as being powerful, yet there was no intervention and the sexual abuse continued.

Mary recently confronted her perpetrator (her father), who she described as a violent man. The day after she confronted him, she called her mother to make sure she was safe. Her mother responded to her daughter's disclosure with, "Well he didn't touch you." Mary's father had entered her bedroom while she was changing her clothes, and while viewing her partially clad body, he made sexual comments with regard to her breasts and her physical development. When Mary disclosed to her mother as to how traumatic this experience was, her mother minimized and dismissed the seriousness of the event because Mary was not actually

touched. This response angered Mary and reinforced that the impact of sexual abuse is not understood, and the fact that she was not physically touched minimized the trauma that she experienced. Mary did not say what her mother's reaction was to the sexual abuse she endured by her brother, which involved sexual intercourse, or if her mother was aware of the sexual abuse by Mary's brother.

#### Prayer and Communication

The issue of "...taking it to the Lord in prayer" (Beth) surfaced as a concern. The fallout of that religious belief has been silence. You talk privately to God about whatever is wrong in your life, but you do not talk to others in your family. Some of the participants received a very clear message from their parents to talk to God about their problems, and to keep it nice and neat and then no one else has to hear about it.

Beth described her perception of prayer as being quite "perverted" in that everyone talks to God, yet no one talks to each other. To talk to God was a way of avoiding communication and conflict. Rather than resolving issues between those involved, they prayed for miracles and for one another.

Beth said that when her family now prays for her,

they are really "...praying for me to get better so that I stop talking." This not only sends the message that the participant is wrong but that the family does not want to be shamed or embarrassed.

Some participants received the message that their parents had a "direct line to God" also sending the message that their parents were "God-like". This was confusing for these participants because they thought that their parents had greater power than they really did. Prayer was deemed to take the place of direct communication, eliminating the need for a disclosure.

Based on the interviews, the participants feel that Mennonites place considerable energy on "being nice", and where possible, conflict is avoided. This may create a strain on relationships because only "nice" things are said to one another, making it unacceptable to say things that are not perceived as nice. The avoidance of conflict, lack of clear and open communication, issues being dealt with "...very quietly and efficiently through quick mediation," (Karen) all seem to have contributed to continued silence. This is consistent with the findings of Thorman (1983) which states that in families where intrafamilial sexual abuse occurs, they struggle with clear communication and resolution of conflict.

Forgiveness and Sin

The following statement depicts the degree to which the participant perceived the sexual abuse as her responsibility, as well as how sinful she was. Here Karen describes her first disclosure and how guilt was her motivation to disclose. "Well the first time it was out of guilt, right? So I knew that I was wrong and I knew that I committing horrible, heinous sins and I had to get forgiveness. I think back and I think, you know that the guilt I must have been experiencing must have been overwhelming for me to have been willing to talk about this knowing that it was a horrible and, and I think in some way I feared that I would have to publicly confess my sin, you know, but the guilt was so overwhelming, I had to, you know. So I just, I can't live with this anymore, and I have to talk about it no matter what the consequences are. Now, it's just sort of, I had left the church by the time I disclosed and my attitude was simply a matter of you can go ahead and sit in the pews as long as you want, and continue ignoring, continue denying it's happening within the community. I just, you know, go right ahead. I'm not, you know, I can't live with that anymore. I know I was sexually abused, and I can pretty well guarantee there's a lot of other women in that community who were

sexually abused. It was just a matter of self-preservation. And I had left the community, so in that sense, I'd said my good-byes." It is important to note that although this woman experienced this guilt and disclosed at the age of 13, the disclosure was not acted upon and the sexual abuse continued. This disclosure was made to a woman from the Mennonite church she was attending at the time.

Several women shared how they were taught to forgive rather than feel angry or experience any other emotion that they were experiencing. They feared having to publicly confess a sin that they were not responsible for, thus choosing silence.

#### Summary of Responses

The environment created by the attitude and approach to sexual abuse by the Mennonite church and the participants' families, as described by the participants, did not lend itself to a disclosure. When disclosures were made, they were made out of fear and guilt, feeling that they were responsible for the abuse, and this belief was reinforced when their disclosure was not acted upon.

Some of the women believe that there has been some growth in the community, yet they believe that there is still considerable growth that needs to take place

before the environment is one that does not force the victim to remain silent. According to others, some communities still do not understand the issue of sexual abuse by a family member, nor are they willing to learn about the matter.

### Research Question II

Does isolation, as described in the literature review, have any relation to the victims' decisions to disclose?

The women were unable to directly answer this question from the perspective of isolation as it relates to their rural location. Because they had only lived in rural settings, and had no other experience to compare it to, they were unable to say whether their experience in a rural location was more isolating than in an urban setting. Through their recommendations though, they did address issues that were specific to their rural setting as well as their Mennonite community.

The women were able to directly answer this question from the perspective of isolation as it relates to their feelings from within themselves and their families. All the women were able to describe how the experience of sexual abuse made them feel

isolated.

### Family

Family Image. The families presented themselves as "perfect" to outsiders so that others would not suspect that the abuse was taking place. For some, their families were "...more concerned with their reputation than anything else. It's more like what are people going to think of me than how do you feel" (Cindy). Some families turned a blind eye to the abuse wanting the family and it's reputation and image to be perfect and unscarred in any way. As a result of this desire and need for perfection, the abuse was denied. The need for a perfect image is supported by both Butler (1985) and Herman (1981), and the flawless image is necessary in order to conceal the sexual abuse.

Several women spoke of how they were taught that Mennonites are superior, and because of that superior belief, these women knew that to admit the abuse to themselves and others, would mean they were less than perfect. Based on the interviews, the presentation of a perfect family and the belief of superiority are common among Mennonites, making identification of sexual abuse and disclosure very difficult.

Karen described her perception of the expectation of perfection and superiority. "...and another thing

that comes in there is that Mennonites see themselves as one hell of a lot better than any other community, and in my own community, the E. M. C. church is better than any other Mennonite church. And, my family saw our family as being a lot better than any other family. And a sort of implication is we are so good. We're such wonderful people, you know, you can't sort of conceive of any sexual abuse having been in that community because 'we're different.' 'We're better.'...supposedly the Mennonite church doesn't practice shunning any more. It's not part of the theology, as in written theology, but it's practised. There's several in my family that can talk about how they were shunned and that's what's happening to me now too. My family is just ignoring me and will not talk to me, you know. And I think it is, part of it is just they're so terrified of what's coming out and it's a big defense mechanism to keep themselves from having to deal with any problems in their own lives, whether they themselves were sexually abused or whatever. I don't know, my God, 'Maybe if I ignore it, maybe it'll go away. Maybe she'll be quiet. She'll shut up.' You know, I think that's what they're hoping will happen."

Several women spoke of being shunned and condemned by the church and community for not living up to the



expectation of being perfect. Cindy was labelled by the Mennonite community as "rotten" or "black". Jennifer shared how, for her, the sexual abuse manifested itself in the form of acting out behaviour and the use of alcohol. She drank alcohol, which was unacceptable in her community, and she acted in a rebellious manner, defying the authorities in her community. As a result, she was perceived by the community as "a problem, rather than a person with a problem." The community did not see her behaviour as indicative of other issues and instead focused on her defiant behaviour. This type of treatment was isolating and definitely inhibited disclosures.

Family Barriers. The women spoke of isolation from the perspective of the barriers that the family created in terms of outsiders entering their home, and the development of social circles within the family. Some of the women shared memories of not only having the guests restricted by their perpetrator, but they themselves also shut out guests to protect the secret of the sexual abuse and dysfunction.

"You try to reach and just grab onto something that will make you feel alive but it was always just out of your reach. And if anybody even tried to come in they were shut out. You would shut them out

yourself. But they were also shut out by, they were discouraged from coming into our home. We weren't allowed friends home. It was very seldom and visitors were discouraged to the utmost except for these family members who visited for awhile. There was one girl's mom who tried to visit, you know, when I think of it now in that way, but my dad kept kicking her out. She was a loud mouth. She was a big threat. At that time I didn't think of it, but I guess maybe she was one person who if she could have got in she could have helped" (Ann).

This description supports Mrazek and Kempe's (1981) findings that rigid boundaries are very characteristic in a family where sexual abuse occurs. This is a characteristic that would be identified in a family residing in a rural or urban setting. The rigid boundaries may be of greater concern in a rural setting because of the limited outside contact that a child or family may have if they reside in an isolated setting such as a farm. Here, it may be possible to create such strong boundaries, that it is easy for outsiders to ignore or forget the existence of the family. Rigid boundaries are of concern in an urban setting as well, where families can blend into their community and become invisible. Regardless of the individual

circumstances, it is important to acknowledge that the isolation that is created due to the formation of rigid boundaries, particularly when that family resides in a rural location, can be devastating. This isolation may further inhibit the victim from exposure to the limited resources and support systems that exist in the rural communities; fostering continued silence.

Sexual abuse is more commonly found in large families (Cavallin, 1966; Lukianowicz, 1972; Maisch, 1972; Tormes, 1968; as cited in Herman, 1981). The total number of children in each of the participants' families, including the participant, were: Cindy, four; Jennifer, four; Sarah, five; Mary, seven; Ann, seven; Susan, 10; Karen, 11; and Beth, 14. These totals include siblings who are deceased as well as step brothers and step sisters.

Several participants came from extremely large families where they formed their own social circles within their family, eliminating the need for involvement with outsiders and further isolating the family. The entire family may also be isolated themselves, forming their own social circle and community within the home. As Thorman (1983) described, family members depend on other family members to meet their needs, and do not allow input

from the external environment and social network.

"...my family was so isolated from the rest of the community, and still is in the sense that we never had anything to do with anybody in the community, and we were a big family, so we had social groups within the family" (Karen).

Their roles were also blurred and the older siblings often parented the younger siblings restricting them from developing friendships and further isolating them. This is also consistent with Thorman's (1983) research.

Susan explained that they did have guests in the home because visiting one another was very common in their community, yet the family presented as very perfect to the guests. "Oh, well I mean, never, I mean we had people in the home but it was all wonderful, PTA, there was never any problems, never, never." In order to preserve the secret and maintain the expected perfect image, the existence of sexual abuse was denied even more.

#### Feelings and Experiences

Powerless and Trapped. Most of the women described their experience of isolation as feeling powerless and trapped with no options and no where to go. As Susan explained, "I'm in this family, and dad

can do what he wants to do. I can't do anything, I am absolutely powerless. And I, where would I go? No where. I didn't know where I would go. So, just basically, totally no power."

Eventually the feelings of being trapped and isolated became overwhelming, and in order to deal with those overwhelming feelings, it meant having to first acknowledge and admit to oneself that the sexual abuse did in fact occur. Jennifer explained how it was necessary for her to acknowledge the sexual abuse to herself in order to acknowledge it to anyone else. "Well I knew that I was beginning to fight it inside, the isolation and feeling trapped, and I knew that in order for myself to fight against that feeling I was going to have to admit first of all to myself and then secondly to someone else that the abuse had occurred."

If they were feeling trapped and isolated and felt that there was no where to go, the lack of resources and available support systems could have possibly contributed to more intense feelings of being trapped, reinforcing the reality that there really was no place to go. When asked where they would have turned to, none of the women were able to identify a resource or support in their community.

Alone and Lonely. All of the women described

feeling lonely and very alone, and for some, this extreme isolation motivated them to disclose. Jennifer described her experiences of loneliness. "...I do know that I have always felt very lonely, which I still struggle with. It's just an emptiness; as if I'm separated. I'm different from everybody else because of what happened."

Sarah shared, "...you're not supposed to tell anybody that (sexual abuse). Because I think my nature is very open, that there was something happening to me that I couldn't tell anybody about it, and sometimes I felt like I was the only person in the whole world, that no one else existed." She eventually disclosed for the first time at the age of 30 and was motivated to disclose because she saw a movie on television about sexual abuse, and realized for the first time in her life, that she was not alone. The movie "...told me I don't have to be alone....I was 30 years old and I had felt alone forever. I just didn't want to be alone anymore."

Many of the women felt alone because they reached a point where they could no longer communicate with others, and had lost sight of what a healthy relationship was. "...I realized that I couldn't relate to other people at all. I just couldn't

communicate. I had no notion of what it was like to have a friendship or relationship. And I was realizing that the abuse was a definite part of it, and so I think I realized that dealing with the abuse was the only way that I sort of worked things out in many other areas of my life" (Karen).

Not only did the sexual abuse create feelings of loneliness and isolation, but the lack of support by some of their parents exacerbated those feelings. "Just if I would have felt I could have talked to someone, if I, because my family was not a family. My parents were not parents that were there for me emotionally, neither my mother nor my father, so because of that, that was one of the reasons that I felt I couldn't tell, because they had never been there for me in that respect" (Jennifer).

Thorman (1983) suggested that the parents in a family where sexual abuse by a relative exists often lack a strong coalition. Jennifer's experience with her parent's may indicate the lack of a strong coalition.

Mary isolated herself further because there was physical violence in her home and she knew her mother was not capable of protecting her. As a child, she considered disclosing to her mother yet she was

uncertain as to whether her mother would believe her. Even if she did believe her, she questioned what her mother would have done since her father (also her perpetrator) was also physically abusing her mother.

Escaping. In order to deal with the extreme loneliness as well as trying to cope with life, some of the women escaped into a fantasy world. "...I just went into a different reality. I mean I think I just lived in a different reality most of my life as a child. So the world of fantasy and the world of being other places than in my physical body in our little house, was where I spent the bulk of my time. Daydreaming and travelling to distant lands" (Beth).

Other women were able to separate themselves, leaving behind the part of them that was being hurt. "I guess that I made that a whole different person. I mean I didn't feel isolated from everybody else because I just left that part of me behind at home when I went with other people" (Susan). The degree to which some of the women were able to separate like this varied. Some women spoke of this in a casual manner, while others separated in a more definite manner where they developed multiple personalities in order to cope with their abuse.



Protection of Others

There was one aspect of isolation that I had not discussed in the review of literature. This is a new perspective on the issue of isolation that was raised in an interview. Beth shared how she had become aware of how she isolates herself further by selecting who and how much of her experience she will share based on whether she thinks the other person can cope with hearing the information.

"I think it's, well I'm in a group right now and I, I just think it's just, it's such a neat dynamic that's going on with the women who are talking and the theme is 'Just Found Isolation', even though we've all already disclosed to many people, but the theme, just the theme that keeps playing is the isolation. And that, like our friends can't handle the intensity and 'Oh, God, we've already burdened them with all this stuff,' and you know, I mean that now we're just so careful, like we select, you know, 'well I already told her last week so this week, I'll take a break.' The theme of isolating yourself because you don't want to burden other people with all the stuff. So. I mean, it's just so striking. The theme of isolating ourselves to protect others from the pain. Yes, very much. Family members and friends and even protecting

the professionals from knowing how bad it really is" (Beth).

This perspective is also reflective of how women will sacrifice their own wellness for the wellness of others, and act as caregivers in a different capacity. It also reinforces how they place their needs second to others; a traditional expectation of women and mothers.

Beth continued on by saying, "...and I mean of course, that's part of having separated ourselves so much from our pain. You know, that in a sense it is a natural part of it, if you look at it that way, but it, it just, it's really striking to me when I sit in that group and I just feel the power of how alone we've been." Once again, stressing the extreme loneliness and realizing the degree to which she lived in seclusion.

#### Rural Setting

Although the level of awareness is increasing, and the resources are more readily available in larger urban settings, it is still viewed as much more difficult to break from the isolation when living in a rural setting. Not only are the resources, support systems, and access to counselling more limited, and in some areas non-existent, the victim risks everybody knowing about their situation and rather than relying

on support from those who know of their pain, they fear ridicule, condemnation, and being the focus of gossip.

Ann explained how she experienced trying to break out of the isolation of living in an abusive home in a rural setting. "Well, it's happening a lot - the awareness - places to go and that but in rural areas it's so much harder and of course the thing of everybody knowing. Even if someone finally gets the courage up to go to someone, well the whole town is going to know. But if I can't handle this (counselling and support) I have to go back (to an abusive home). Then there's no turning back. Like you don't have a safety valve. You have to have a safety valve that you know if you go there (i.e. counselling, shelter, safe house), that no one else is going to know because you have to sometimes go four, five, six times, whatever it takes before you can leave a situation you're in. If that's the case of depending on where it is if you know you have to go and there's no turning back, you're not going to go." There were no support systems for her and she remained isolated in an abusive home for many years.

#### Mennonite Community

It was felt by some that because of the way the Mennonites view and deal with sexual abuse, there is

little hope of the Mennonite community making the necessary changes in their beliefs and attitudes. Beth described this as "despairing and tragic". The beliefs and attitudes by the Mennonites as described in response to Research Question I, create a feeling of isolation in that the victim questions whether she will be believed, is certain she will not receive support, and fears being re-victimized by the community. Re-victimization would occur in the sense that if they are believed, they risk the situation being resolved through "quick mediation and forgiveness" rather than a therapeutic healing process. Or, as described by one woman, they risk not being believed or being expected to apologize to their perpetrator for making such an accusation.

Susan shared a lengthy story of how her father pursued a woman sexually and when this woman sought help from her minister, she was made to apologize to her pursuant for making the accusation. This participant still wonders if the minister had dealt with the issue by probing into the situation with her father, maybe he would have been able to recognize that her father was exceeding boundaries in other areas, such as the sexual and physical abuse that the children were enduring. Susan felt that this could have been an

opportunity for someone outside the family to intervene, yet due to the approach and beliefs of the minister, the deeper issues and truth were never revealed, and another innocent person was re-victimized.

#### Summary of Responses

All the women felt isolated in one form or another. They were isolated within their homes and families, and they were isolated within themselves. They were also isolated behind the mask of perfection they were expected to wear when they presented to the community. They were further isolated by not knowing where to turn to and not being able to reach out for support. They feared rejection or public humiliation and chose the isolating pain of silence rather than disclosure.

#### Research Question III

Do the victims' decisions to disclose their sexual abuse by a relative have any relation to their knowledge of other victims of sexual abuse by a relative in the community?

#### Not Aware of Other Sexual Abuse Victims

Almost all of the women said they were not aware of, and had never heard of anyone else who had been

sexually abused. This lack of knowledge further isolated them and encouraged them to maintain their silence. Many of them said that had they known of others, or had the chance to meet or speak with others who had experienced sexual abuse, they may have disclosed sooner. Once they became aware of others, which for many, was only after they were adults and had left their home community, were they able to acknowledge their victimization to themselves. That was the first step toward their disclosure.

"Well, I guess it's very interesting because I only began to acknowledge to myself and then, many years later, to others, you know, to begin to disclose after I heard a number of women talk about their experiences. So, their disclosures then gave me, sort of courage, I guess and permission to talk. So it was only after I'd heard quite a number of people talk about their experience that I even, like to acknowledge to myself" (Beth).

Sarah concluded that, "...the reason that this was probably happening to me was because I was really bad. Cause this would never happen to anyone who was nice, and all my friends were really nice."

This perception is logical in that family image is highly valued in the Mennonite community and everyone

presented as being nice. This woman did not ever suspect that others who presented as nice could have also been a victim of sexual abuse. Instead, she turned it inward, labelled herself as bad, and perceived the abuse as her responsibility.

Aware of Other Victims Outside the Community

Susan had read a story in the newspaper about sexual abuse in a family, yet she remembers that it was very rare for the media to report such a story. She said it was so rare that she remembers reading the story by "stumbling onto it". She never equated her experience with those in the newspaper story though. "Well you heard about it, you know, but it was always sort of put in the context of 'Oh, those are alcoholics' something very abnormal about this family. So it was never, I never even equated my experience with those because we were a church going, supposedly Christian family, you know, so I never even realized, 'Hey, maybe what I'm going through is the same thing that that person in the newspaper went through,' because the suggestion always was somehow put with it that this was because of the circumstances they lived in. So I never felt any connection with anybody else as far as it happening to them."

The responses to the story by those around Susan

encouraged her to maintain her silence. "There was never, 'Isn't that terrible. I wonder what's being done? That poor girl.' There was never any of that. It was always the suggestion that maybe she was to blame or maybe she was making it up. If any comment was made at all it was never, no one ever gave me an indication that 'Ahhh, isn't that terrible that that's happening.' It was either something that maybe she deserved or 'Well she lives in that kind of home, what can you expect?' Sort of that kind of an attitude." Responses such as these sent the message that "...it doesn't pay to talk about this" (Susan).

Jennifer remembered reading books and wishing that she could talk to someone else who had the same experience as her. "I guess six or seven years ago it was coming out but not nearly what it is today. So I did feel very alone in my feelings and although there were books written, like I was saying, we were reading a lot of books about it, although there were books written, there was still no people that I knew and I felt, one of the feelings that I remember feeling a lot was I wish that there was somebody in this world that I could talk to that had experienced the same kind of feelings that I was experiencing now,..." Her experience stresses that books and resources were not



enough. She needed the actual contact with others who had endured sexual abuse.

Aware of Other Victims Within their Community

Only two women, Cindy and Mary, were aware of someone else in their community who experienced sexual abuse. The responses of others to these girls and to the issue of sexual abuse impacted on Cindy and Mary to the extent that they were determined to not disclose and risk being subjected to the ridicule that the other girls experienced. Those in the community judged, teased, and gossiped about them, and they did not offer support in any way.

Cindy became aware of the abuse through rumours in town. "I'm not saying anything, look at how they're getting teased. But I never did any of the teasing. It was just more or less like, I'd cringe because I'd know in the back of my mind that, like. I don't know, you get this sick feeling like, I get this sick feeling in my stomach and it's like the whole world would just spin. What if they find out? What if they find out? They're all going to laugh at me. They're all going to point fingers, and stuff like that, so it had an affect."

Mary became aware of others through a disclosure made by the girl herself. This girl perceived it as

"just fooling around" rather than sexual abuse. "...it was just fooling around, you know. Stuff like that can, can come back to haunt you, but I wouldn't. Yeah, I know, that's from one. From some other girls there was some cousins of, of like the girl it happened to and since then it has. In fact the one brother has done time. Yeah. Yeah, that was a real shmoz."

Mary continued by saying, "You know, and, and people, people are so quick to judge. How could they, you know, how could they take it to the police and how could they take it to the judge, you know, and I think that's crap. Why not? Why not pay for, you know, pay for the crime that has been done? Cause I know exactly when this was in court it was a cousin who this had happened to, and they, she just couldn't believe, she just couldn't imagine why they would do something just drag it all out from the past and, and drag it through the courts. At that time, of course, I couldn't say anything. I don't know if I would even today, again maybe because of closed ears, you know, it's just."

#### Summary of Responses

The majority of women were not aware of anyone else in their community who had experienced sexual abuse. This in itself is disconcerting because it stresses the point that there were others in the

community who were also victims of sexual abuse, yet managed to maintain their secret in a setting that the participants of this study described as one in which "everybody knows everybody's business". This must have taken incredible strength on the part of the victim, the perpetrator, and anyone else living within the abusive system to preserve and maintain the secret.

Those that had heard about women or girls who had experienced sexual abuse did so only through the media. They felt that hearing of the sexual abuse through the media was only a chance discovery, and it was not the norm to report on sexual abuse.

All of the women felt that if they had only known of someone else, they may not have felt so isolated and different, and maybe they would have felt less "crazy", had more faith in their own perceptions of what they were experiencing, been able to admit the sexual abuse to themselves, and felt empowered enough to disclose to someone. On the other hand, they also felt that the isolation was so intense that they may not have been open to hearing the experiences of others, and for some, their allegiance to their family (and perpetrator) was too strong to infiltrate. They also said that they felt very hopeless in that there was little that could have penetrated their wall of

isolation.

#### Research Question IV

Do the victims' decisions to disclose their sexual abuse by a relative have any relation to their level of involvement with people or communities from outside their own?

None of the women received any information about sexual abuse while growing up and living in their home community. They first received the information either when they became involved with people who did not live in their community, which for most of the women, also meant non-Mennonites, or when they moved out of their community.

#### Outside Contact Affected Decision to Disclose

For most of the women, contact with people from outside their community did affect their decision to disclose. For example, Ann had friends who did not live in the same community as she, they had been involved in schooling and various activities outside their own community and, as she phrased it, had been "exposed" to considerably more than she had been. Although these friends were from the same area as Ann, she felt that they had been exposed to more information and experiences, increasing their awareness and

decreasing their isolation. She felt that her friend was able to provide the support and awareness that she needed. "...but she was so much more aware of things going on because she wasn't isolated like I was and she was going to university, she did a lot to help me become more aware of what was going on out there and things that were happening and even so, she had a good feeling of what was going on for me, but she didn't know for sure."

These friends now live in and attend the church in Ann's home community. Ann's friend and her friend's husband are trying to create an awareness of the issue, yet her friend's husband is not receiving any support from the Mennonite church. Ann explained how "...he's trying to make a difference in the church. He's one of those guys who is trying but he has been looked down on, you know, he's been ostracized, he's been everything, because his modern thinking is too modern for the church."

Another woman, Susan, described how hearing about sexual abuse and the experiences of others allowed her to not feel so alone and motivated her to disclose, yet the information she received came from outside her community. "I guess in the sense that I started hearing about all these other kids and just receiving

information. The information that I got never came from my own community." This response supports the need that participants had to seek information outside their home community because it was not readily available or accessible to them.

Karen described how her decision to disclose was affected by her involvement with people from outside her community, in this case, her therapist. "Well yes. My involvement with my therapist. And I did feel safe with her. I did come to the point where, in spite of how shameful and how much responsibility I took for what happened, I still was willing to talk about it and bring it out into the open." I would like to note that her therapist is a non-Mennonite from a larger urban setting.

Jennifer stated, "I first received information about sexual abuse through our church library. I began reading books even before I went to Sandra." (Sandra is her therapist). It is important to note that Jennifer is referring to a non-Mennonite church, and she received this information when she was about 33 years old. She continued by saying, "The fact that I wasn't attending a Mennonite church and the fact that I felt safe within the church that I was within and the fact that Sandra, although she is Mennonite herself,

but I say I did feel a lot safer because I don't believe that if I would have been within the Mennonite church I wouldn't have felt that I would have been loved through it and believed and cared for, I wouldn't have disclosed. It took me a long time to build up the kind of trust that I did with her just on a friendship level and just to, like trusting is one of the problems that I do have and to trust her enough to tell her at first it took a long time. And we had been friends for many years before that and if she would have been in, or I shouldn't say that, it wouldn't have made a difference I suppose if she would have been within a different church, but because I had been accepted within the church too, that made it a lot easier."

Sarah stated that outside involvement and information definitely affected her decision to disclose. She was 30 years old when she first received information on sexual abuse. "Oh absolutely. It's just more talked about here. There's a lot more awareness here and there's so many resources here. There are sections in libraries on sexuality. It's not hidden because there are a lot of things that are pretty open and even as I was growing up, and after I moved here, I found out a lot of things I don't think necessarily they had anything to do about sexuality or

a lot of things that had to do with sex, and I don't necessarily believe that it was because I was getting older. I certainly believe that that was a part of it, but girls that I met when I first moved here knew about penises and vaginas and periods and breasts and how babies are born. They knew all those things and they'd known about them for years...No one was open and there wasn't any information. I hope that that's changed to some degree with more women coming back - leaving the community and then going back to the community as care givers or educators. Hopefully they don't carry on traditions."

#### Sexual Abuse and Awareness in Society

Fortune and Hormann (1980) raised the concern several years ago, saying that resources were limited in the rural communities, stifling the level of awareness. Although some of the participants have not resided in their home community for several years, they recognize that some changes are being implemented and that there is an attempt being made to increase awareness. They are also aware that not all communities are receptive to the availability and distribution of information, and since many members of their home community do not believe that sexual abuse exists within their community, they do not believe that



it is necessary either.

The participants ranged from 24 to 43 years of age. In all fairness, 25 to 30 years ago there was little to no information available on sexual abuse anywhere. The lack of information was not only due to a resistance to the need for awareness and the rural setting being more isolated and remote than the urban setting. The issue was much more broad; society as a whole was not as aware of the issue. Society is now more aware, and the rural community and the Mennonites are a part of that larger society.

#### Summary of Responses

Many participants spoke of perceiving sexual abuse as normal and acceptable. From a Mennonite perspective, they had been taught not to challenge authority figures or their elders, were expected to be "nice", to be "good", and to remain silent. In many ways, this is a form of re-victimization where the victim is expected to be a compliant participant with no available supports. If information were available, at least they may be able to recognize how unacceptable sexual abuse is. If all individuals, particularly children and women, were shown respect and given permission to speak their mind and express themselves rather than being expected to be invisible and silent,

they may be empowered enough to disclose and possibly challenge their perpetrators or the system they are a part of.

All the women felt a need to know of others who had been victims of sexual abuse. They also felt a need to speak with others to verify and validate their feelings and experiences. They felt that this knowledge and contact may have enabled them to disclose sooner.

## Chapter VI

### Recommendations/Research Question V

What aspects/resources might be put in place to help the victims disclose?

I have chosen to devote an entire chapter to this research question and frame it in the form of recommendations. I have incorporated both the participants' recommendations and my recommendations into this chapter, indicating the source of the recommendation. Many of these recommendations address the basic philosophy of the Mennonites and speak to issues that are inherent to the Mennonites. My intent is to address the concerns and recommendations expressed by the participants with the hope and goal of providing ideas for change that will in turn, provide support to the community and those that are silently hurting.

#### Education

The participants believe that it is important to educate not only children and those who have experienced sexual abuse, but it is also important to educate all members of the community. When a disclosure is made, they believe it is important that

the receivers of that information understand what they are hearing, have some grasp of the issue, and know what to do with the information they are hearing. They believe it is also important to create an awareness in all members of the community because most disclosures are not presented in a direct manner, but rather in an implicit, covert manner in which the listener or observer may need to be aware of signs, symptoms, and indicators in order to identify the issue.

#### Schools

Those participants who left their rural community fairly recently did not receive any family life education, had not received any information on sex and sexuality, and felt very naive about issues that they desperately needed information on. They believed that their naivety and lack of awareness regarding issues related to sexual abuse inhibited them from disclosing or seeking support while living in their home community as children.

The participants clearly stated that they believe there is a need to educate the children and our future generations on the issue of family life education, sex, sexuality, and any other topics related to the issue of sexual abuse. They suggested that the Family Life education begin at the kindergarten level, and continue

until grade 12. They recommended that programs such as "Feeling Yes Feeling No" and "Second Step" continue.

They suggested that concerns such as drugs and substance abuse, alcoholism, rape and date rape be addressed, and assertiveness training would be an asset. In addition to sexual, physical and emotional abuse, for some of the participants there were issues of hidden alcoholism within the home. Although alcohol is not available in many of the rural Mennonite communities, it can still be obtained just as drugs can also be accessed. Sexual abuse can manifest itself in many ways, one of which can be through the use of drugs and alcohol.

Although there is a Family Life education program that is available for all Manitoba schools, Family Life is an optional program taught in almost all schools. The school can determine what will be taught within the program, and to what degree or depth it will be taught. Prior to teaching this program, teachers in Manitoba receive training so that they will be able to present the material in a knowledgeable and appropriate manner.

Presently, there is a Family Life education curriculum for grades five, seven and nine, making it difficult to teach a program at levels for which a curriculum does not exist. There is a Health

curriculum for kindergarten to grade 10. This curriculum has a unit which addresses social and emotional well being, as well as a unit on safety.

The Manitoba Department of Education researched many Family Life programs prior to developing their own curriculum. They decided to develop a curriculum for grades five, seven and nine based on the level of readiness of the students at those ages. They recognize that there are many issues that are important and need to be addressed, yet the overall curriculum is overcrowded and there are many necessary issues addressed in other disciplines. Personal safety is addressed in grade five, although that may be too late for some children. Decision making and some family issues are addressed in other disciplines. For example, issues related to violence may be addressed in Guidance and Counselling; issues related to family and economy may be addressed in Social Studies; and the impact of economic stress may be addressed in Business Education. Although the situation is not ideal, there are various degrees of implementation throughout the Province. According to the Department of Education, children are receiving the necessary information in their schools.

Family Life is an important program, yet in order

to prevent sexual abuse or to invite disclosures, there are many other aspects of information that are necessary. Some issues that need to be addressed would include: addressing the issue of sexual abuse in a direct manner; assertiveness training; learning to challenge others, including authority figures; resources and support systems both in the immediate area and in larger urban settings; direct knowledge on how to seek support in a rural community; self-confidence and trusting one's own perceptions; and direct information encouraging children to tell and providing an outline of the steps involved when a disclosure takes place. There are many children who have not and never will be sexually abused, yet this information would be beneficial to them in that they may know someone who has experienced sexual abuse, or they may recognize the indicators in one of their friends and can be a support to their friend. Some of these aspects are addressed to some degree in other disciplines, yet as previously mentioned, they may need to be addressed at an earlier level in an age appropriate manner.

Jennifer had been invited by Child and Family Services to share her experience with a group of adolescents who had disclosed sexual abuse and wanted

to hear from someone who had been through a similar experience. This was an enlightening experience for the teens and it enabled those who had also experienced sexual abuse, as well as other forms of abuse, to hear from another survivor, to let them know that their feelings and perceptions of their experience were accurate and valid, and to reinforce that they were not alone.

This is a valuable way to convey information, yet if this approach is taken, it is important that the speaker be aware of his or her own issues and boundaries, and that they have begun the healing process. Speakers should not present with the intention of serving their own needs only. I would recommend that whenever there is a speaker or presentation of some sort, the organizers ensure that there are qualified counsellors available. The counsellors need to be available in order to handle the disclosures that may occur and to support those who may be affected by the presentation.

#### Churches

The participants believe that in addition to educating children and future generations, there must also be a focus on the community as a whole who are potential receivers of disclosures. The church is the



ideal medium to reach all the people of the community.

Ministry. All of the participants said that they were aware of either leaders of the church who had sexually abused someone, or of leaders who had dealt with a disclosure in a way that they felt re-victimized the person. They did not feel supported by their ministers or church and would not have chosen the church or leaders as a place to disclose. Based on this information, the participants recommended that all the ministry receive education on the issue of sexual abuse. This includes the pastors, deacons, deaconesses, and anyone else that would be considered part of the ministry.

Preaching from the Pulpit. According to previous research (Block, 1991) sexual abuse is affecting a portion of the Mennonite community that is comparable to all other communities. Due to the additional isolation of the rural setting, it seems like the pulpit is the ideal arena in which to address the issue and reach a large group of people. There have been a few Mennonite churches that have addressed the issue from the pulpit, reaching a large portion of the Mennonite community. The participants suggested that this continue, only to a greater degree.

If ministers choose to make this a topic to speak

on in their church, there are several issues they may address. Some suggestions would be: recognition that sexual abuse exists within the Mennonite community, in particular their own community; education on how and why sexual abuse occurs, and how to increase awareness and become knowledgeable of the indicators of sexual abuse; encourage and empower children to say "No" to anything and anyone they do not feel comfortable with, including authority figures and their elders; recognition that the healing process is different for all victims; victims and perpetrators will need to seek help through a therapeutic process; recognition that not all victims will choose to or be able to forgive their perpetrators; acknowledge that no victim at any time, invites sexual abuse nor should they be blamed or held responsible for the occurrence of the abuse; victims are in no way "bad" people; that the community needs to attempt to be respectful of those involved in the system of sexual abuse, including the victim, the perpetrator, and those affected by the sexual abuse; and, if the community or individuals do not feel that they are able to accept those involved in the system of sexual abuse, they should be encouraged to not place judgment or ridicule those individuals involved.

I would encourage the ministry to become fully

informed and educated on the issue prior to preaching, and to be prepared for possible disclosures. I would also suggest that if this were to be a topic for a sermon, there be a support network in place prior to the sermon, ensuring that qualified counsellors are present to support those who may be affected by the sermon.

Groups and Committees. The participants stated that there are several groups within the church that would enable educators to reach smaller populations. For example, the youth groups, women's groups, and men's groups could all receive information at their meetings. This could also be a topic for discussion and a way to explore how they as a group can provide support to those who presently are or have experienced sexual abuse.

By reaching people through church groups and committees, the educators would be able to address specific concerns that are relevant to that particular group of people. For example, young people may have issues that are different from their parents and this may be a comfortable environment in which to address them.

Educators. There were two sides presented to the issue of who the educators should be. One group of

women recommended that the educators be from outside the Mennonite community and or the community that was receiving the education. This would enable the presenter to be unbiased and objective and would be presenting from a professional perspective with no involvement with those present.

Another group of women suggested that in order for the community to truly hear and receive the information, the educator would have to be Mennonite, yet not necessarily from that particular community. In addition to being Mennonite, these participants believe that the educator needs to be a woman, although they did not explain their rationale for this.

Library. Since the church is the primary meeting place in most rural Mennonite communities, the participants recommended that the churches develop a resource library. This library could include literature in the form of books, journals, pamphlets, video and cassette tapes, and educational kits. The resources should be available in English as well as in high and low German.

Low German is a spoken language, although it is now becoming a written language as well. In order to develop a multi-lingual resource library, it may be necessary for someone in the community to act as an

interpreter until such time as the resources can be produced in the other languages.

### Seminars

Most of the women were familiar with or had attended the previous conferences that focused on domestic violence within Mennonite families. They all believed that the seminars were necessary yet they had some concerns.

Regular Seminars. All the participants said that more workshops and seminars need to be conducted. Once or twice a year is not enough; they need to be conducted on a regular basis. This needs to be a priority, particularly because this is one way of reaching those who live in rural settings and do not have access to the resources that urban settings have.

Attendance. The participants suggested that seminars and conferences need to take place more often to encourage attendance. Many of the participants said that they did not yet feel safe enough to attend the conferences, yet they were all interested. Some of the participants feared being recognized and were uncomfortable with the possible repercussions and impact their exposure may have on their family and community. Others felt that they would be condemned and would be subjected to further ridicule, similar to

what they had experienced previously.

All of the participants in this study have been in therapy for some time and have been willing to talk openly about their experience for this study, yet most did not feel safe enough to attend the conference. If these women did not feel safe, I would question if those women who have not entered into a healing process or are not in a therapeutic relationship with a counsellor would have felt safe enough to attend the conferences as well. Therefore, it is necessary to be sensitive to the needs of women who have entered into a healing process, as well as those who have not.

It is clear that although the fear of attending exists, the seminars need to continue. There are many individuals who attended the conferences who have not been victims of sexual abuse. It is important to recognize their interest and effort to attend in order to increase their awareness in the area of sexual abuse and domestic violence.

Agenda. The conferences focused on issues relating specifically to Mennonites who had experienced sexual abuse and other forms of violence, yet some of the participants shared a concern with regard to the agenda. They expressed discomfort and concern with the focus on issues such as forgiveness and the strong

theological perspective. They did not elaborate on this issue, yet those who raised it, clearly conveyed their discomfort. It was issues such as these that caused many women to feel uncomfortable and afraid to attend the conference.

The seminars that have been presented over the past year have been of great value to many individuals and the community as a whole. In the future, in addition to professionals, it may be necessary to consult with victims and survivors regarding issues that they feel are necessary to focus on.

Some issues to address could include: acceptance and support free of judgement and condemnation; the impact of sexual abuse on the victims/survivors, the perpetrators as well as those affected by the abuse; the belief of pacifism and the confusion this creates in a home where violence exists; and, a feminist analysis of the Mennonite church and the roles of women, men and children.

Safety Net. When seminars are held, there will likely be some reaction, particularly when the issue is domestic violence and sexual abuse. This reaction may occur internally or externally and may be expressed in an overt or covert manner. To support individuals and families, I believe that a safety net and support

network must be in place prior to any conference or seminar. This means having an adequate number of qualified counsellors present should anyone need immediate support. The number of counsellors should always be over estimated.

Quite often the need for support extends beyond the time of the conference and those attending need to be made aware of supports that are available to them. This is of particular importance to rural residents because they may have to travel to attend the conference or seminar, and may only need supports once they return home. Home may be a small village or isolated farm house where there are no resources readily available.

Toll free phone numbers, crisis lines, and names of counsellors must be provided to all those attending. All who attend must know that they will receive information on how to receive support. It would also be beneficial if the issue of transportation could be addressed so that individuals are not attending an emotional conference, and then leaving on a long drive home on the highway. If the conference has evoked emotions or memories, it is not safe to then drive on the highway shortly after.



Homes

Sex and sexuality are normal, healthy aspects of life. As mentioned previously, the participants had one of two experiences while growing up. One experience was that of a negative attitude toward sex and sexuality where no discussion ever took place. Sex was a woman's duty and obligation and nothing more, sex was viewed as a sin, and there was little warmth and affection shown in the home.

The other experience was the opposite to this where sex was talked about constantly, yet in an inappropriate manner. There were always jokes, sexual innuendos, and promiscuous comments made, violating healthy boundaries and creating awkward and unsafe feelings.

There needs to be a balance between the two situations described. The issue of sex and sexuality needs to be talked about more openly, in a positive manner, and in a way that does not produce feelings of guilt or shame. Boundaries must be respected and not violated.

The participants voiced a need for a change in attitude and approach within the home. This is very difficult because to change an attitude means to change a belief system that includes values and convictions

that are so deeply ingrained that they have become the norm.

In order to change such a deep rooted belief it is necessary to be provided with alternative ideas, approaches and rationales, and to have access to, and receive the various forms of education discussed previously. When presenting information that means making fundamental changes in a belief system, it is important to not declare one as right or wrong but rather approach it from the perspective that there are flaws in all beliefs systems, and there may be alternative approaches that can provide a healthier perspective. Change can be very scary especially when this means making changes in the basic foundation of one's belief system. This is why a support system is very important to not only the victim, but also to all those affected by the abuse and to those who are attempting to incorporate changes into their lives.

### Counselling/Resources

#### Counsellors

Mennonite verses Non-Mennonite. It was very clear that the women felt more comfortable with a non-Mennonite counsellor. They believed that a non-Mennonite counsellor may understand them more fully and

felt that their chances of being believed and validated were greater than if they met with a counsellor who was Mennonite.

When the counsellor is part of the community, they are immersed in the issues of the community and are often involved personally or as an acquaintance with several members of their client's family. All the women said that this would make them less likely to be open and to talk comfortably.

For many of the women, a holistic, all encompassing approach to counselling was also important. Although Christian based counselling is suitable for many, there are those who prefer a holistic approach that may or may not include a Christian approach. For many of the women, it is the Christian based philosophy that they are angry at and therefore it would not be suitable.

Based on this, it is important that there be counsellors available in the rural communities who are Mennonite, non-Mennonite, those who counsel from a Christian perspective, as well as a holistic approach in order to serve all the people. The counsellors need to be qualified, as well as independent, unbiased, objective individuals who are not part of the community.

Ministers as Counsellors. In many communities, the participants perceived the ministers as feeling obligated to counsel women and families. The participants felt that their ability to counsel was not always adequate and in many instances, they felt that they were not qualified to be doing so. Therefore, they recommended that the ministerial refer their church members to qualified counsellors rather than feeling that it is their obligation to provide guidance in an area they may not be qualified in.

Not all ministers are trained counsellors and it is important to recognize one's limits and abilities, particularly when those limitations may be at the expense of someone else. It is also important to give the ministers permission to refer those who they do not feel qualified to counsel, rather than feeling that they are responsible for providing guidance to community members in all areas. This places incredible pressure on the ministers and if additional counsellors are available in the area, this may eliminate the need for the ministers to counsel, instead providing them with the opportunity to be a support to the member.

Travelling Counsellor. In order to be a counsellor who is not part of the community, one suggestion was to have a travelling counsellor. The

analogy that was used was the travelling book mobile that moved to a different location every day. The same could apply for a counsellor. The counsellor could either have an office in each of the different locations, or else he or she could travel in a vehicle, such as a van, that would be suitable for counselling. This would allow the villages and farm communities to be reached without the residents having to travel. It would also mean that children or adolescents, adults who do not have vehicles, and the disabled would have access to counselling. (I would like to note that this is a goal that I have already begun to explore and hopefully will implement in some form in the near future).

#### Crisis Lines

All members of the community need to be aware of the toll free crisis lines that exist in the province, as well as the phone numbers for the crisis lines in Winnipeg. One way to ensure that this information reaches all the members is through the school system to the children, in church bulletins and newsletters, the local newspapers, and if the church is able to develop a resource library, include the information in a written brochure. There is a portion of the community that may be illiterate, yet those people may be reached

through radio and television announcements.

When advertising the telephone numbers and locations, it is important to reinforce that if the phone call is long distance, crisis lines will always accept the charges to a long distance call. This will enable the caller to remain anonymous so that the phone call does not appear as a long distance charge on the phone bill.

#### Support Groups

Support groups can be beneficial to those in need of someone to talk to. They provide an opportunity to share experiences and feelings, and to hear those of others. This is one way to break the isolation of living in an abusive situation as well as the rural setting, and to keep in touch with others who are going through a similar process.

In order to feel safe enough to attend a support group, the participants expressed a need for a private, anonymous gathering place so that the group members would feel less threatened by the chance of others knowing that they were attending. When advertising the support group, the organizers should advertise a phone number only. To maintain anonymity, Sarah suggested that women wear a wig or conceal their identity in some way so that you are not recognized as you enter and

leave the meeting place. Other participants felt a need for anonymity yet were unable to provide suggestions as to how to ensure the necessary privacy.

The participants believed that they would have benefitted from talking to others who could identify with them. They also said that they needed to attend a group that emphasized a feminist perspective that empowered and supported women, and focused on their needs, desires and issues.

#### Safe Houses

Safe houses and shelters are just beginning to emerge in the rural areas, yet many more are needed. It would also be helpful if the shelter could provide some sort of service to those in need of transportation. In urban settings such as Winnipeg, there are transit buses and taxi cabs whereas in the rural areas there is no public transportation that would enable people to travel to the shelters. The transportation or shuttle services may enable individuals who would otherwise not be able to, to access the shelter and seek the support they need.

#### Intervention

Action. It is important that once a disclosure is made that the information is acted upon and some sort of intervention takes place. This could mean anything

from the involvement of Child and Family Services, notification of the R.C.M.P. or counselling for the individual and the family. If someone in the community is aware of abuse of any kind, it is their legal responsibility to report the abuse and not perpetuate the cycle of silence.

#### Attitudes and Beliefs

Based on the interviews, there is a need for a change in the attitudes and beliefs not only toward the issue of sexual abuse, but in many other areas as well. These changes take place in deeply rooted areas such as the family structure, gender roles, and the history of Mennonites. I am not sure how many of these changes can take place because they are so ingrained and it may mean a change in a very deep rooted philosophy that lies at the base of the Mennonite community. I will however, present areas in which the participants recommended change.

#### Traditional Roles

"Like I feel that the Mennonites will have to lose a lot of the Mennoniteness, and that being part of it, the fact that women are just property, I mean that's a very big thing about being Mennonite, is that you're this meek, submissive woman who doesn't speak up, and



they're going to have to face up and talk about that before a woman's going to feel safe disclosing in a Mennonite community. I think there's a lot of other things like simply, this whole thing about just denying your emotions. Not allowing yourself to feel anger and to express anger. I mean for years, I was a good Mennonite woman, ignoring my emotions, denying the emotions that were there, repressing them. For a good cause. I was a good Mennonite Christian woman and I couldn't be angry, and I think that really hindered and stopped me and slowed me down from disclosing so it was, once I turned my back on that whole thing, then all of sudden, I'm no longer this Mennonite Christian woman. Now I can be angry...They don't see the need, and the value of expressing emotions and of allowing yourself to feel. I mean, they're such stoics" (Karen).

All the women discussed the oppression that existed in their homes and communities. They were raised in patriarchal systems where men were the dominate figures, women submitted to their husbands and men, and children were invisible. As a result, women and children learned to not challenge authority figures, children were taught to honour their parent's regardless of the abuse they may have been enduring,

and men had incredible pressure placed on them to be authoritarians.

The most valuable skill we can provide children with is the ability to say "No" and to empower them to express their feelings. Rather than viewing a child who says "No" as defiant, an alternative view may be that the child is expressing independent thinking and trust in their feelings. This may be their first skill for the prevention of any type of violation. To teach children to conform to the needs of adults means that children are denied the right to expression of thoughts and feelings. Compliant children are ideal victims in that they are easy to violate and will maintain the secret.

Emotions. As a result of the fear of conflict and inability to communicate clearly, many feelings and emotions were denied or ignored. There needs to be a focus on recognition of feelings, validation for those feelings, permission to experience and express all emotions particularly anger, and recognition that anger is a positive and healthy emotion.

The participants spoke of how women are not respected and are viewed as hysterical and emotional beings. They also spoke of how children were not given the recognition that they deserved. All human beings

are worthy of respect, of being treated with dignity and it is important that recognition and respect is given to the voices of women and children.

As a result of the patriarchal system, men are also denied a right to their emotions, to express hurt, to reach out when they are in need of support, and to express feelings of failure or frustration. Most importantly, a patriarchal system does not allow for error, particularly on the part of the male, and it does not allow for the healthy expression of anger. Instead, power and control are the focus and if they are not maintained they may be perceived as, or feel that they are weak.

Implementing Change. This is such a difficult area to implement change in, yet it is necessary for the emotional well being of the people. A balance of power, equal roles, and recognition of value that lies within each individual is needed in order to want to change. First and foremost though, the desire for change needs to be present.

There are workshops and programs on assertiveness training and guidance as to how to challenge one another in a non-threatening way. There is literature available on personal growth for men, women and children, yet change is difficult when the beliefs are

so ingrained. The previous suggestions on education by the church and schools may be the most effective way of reaching the community.

### Image

Those who have experienced sexual abuse already try very hard to maintain a perfect image. Perfection is the ideal mask so that no one will ask questions or suspect any problems. When the expectation for perfection already exists, the pressure is greater to maintain the perfect image, not only to conceal the secret of abuse, but to uphold the expected image.

Perfection. All the women felt a need to be accepted for who they are rather than who they were expected to be. They recommended that the expectation of the perfect family image dissolve, and focus on the realities of family life and all of its imperfections. One way to let go of the perfection is to recognize that they as Mennonites are equal to all others rather than believing that they are superior, as they have been taught to believe. Believing that an entire community is superior is to deny the existence of imperfection and flaws, one of which is sexual abuse. This also conveys the message that if someone is or has experienced sexual abuse, he/she is less than perfect, not superior, and the possibility exists for feelings

of guilt for failing their family and community.

Imperfection. It is important to also acknowledge and support the person who may be viewed as a rebel and not fit in with the community. This rebellion could be, but is not necessarily, a manifestation of sexual abuse. Rather than judging this person or the family, offer support and provide an atmosphere of acceptance so that if there is some sort of dysfunction that exists, the environment is one that will invite and welcome a disclosure. As Jennifer phrased it, "...One of the things that we say is that the churches should be a hospital and not a hotel, and I think a lot of the Mennonite churches are more hotels to get dressed up at and to look good and to paste a smile on your face and to make good food and I think what the Mennonite church needs to do is to become more of a caring community and to give the people who have been abused permission to talk."

Atmosphere for Disclosure. The circumstances can be ideal, yet it is still too scary and threatening to disclose sexual abuse. Even though there are some that will never feel safe enough to disclose, if the environment is one that ensures acceptance, is free of judgement, and will provide on-going support, the door may be opened to a few that would have otherwise

remained silent.

### Communication

As mentioned previously, there is a need for open communication both in the family and in the community. Prayer is a very important form of communication with God, and plays a very important role in a Christian belief system, yet communicating directly with others is also important and needs to be encouraged and practised.

With the permission and approval of the church, there are many parenting programs that could be offered through the church that would enable parents to be exposed to alternative approaches to communicating with their spouses, partners, children and extended family members. Many of the skills that are discussed can be transferred to other relationships as well.

### History of Mennonite

Based on the interviews, there appears to be some confusion in the theological beliefs and philosophy of the Mennonites, and their practices. Some of these beliefs inhibited disclosure and instilled guilt in the participants.

As a community, it would be worthwhile to examine the history of the Mennonites, the role of prayer, the role of men, women and children, the role of silence,

and the role of violence. For example, the participants felt that violence was the norm in many families, and it was accepted to the extent that no one questioned its existence nor was it recognized as wrong. It would be worthwhile to explore why violence is so prevalent in a passivist community. Overall, there were many incongruencies between the beliefs and the practices, and it would be valuable to explore these discrepancies, and explore how to regain harmony between the beliefs and practices.

### Media

#### Radio

Many of the Mennonites are immigrants. They speak either high or low German, and do not speak English at all, or they are illiterate and cannot read or write. As Sarah mentioned, almost all rural Mennonite homes have their radios tuned into the CFAM radio station. This is an ideal forum to reach both the literate and the illiterate. Sarah had mentioned that it was common for rural residents to listen to the funeral announcements, and she suggested that there be a show following the announcements called "A Lost Innocence". Here the show could focus on presenting information on various issues, one of which could be sexual abuse.

Television

Another way to reach the community is through the television. Talk shows, news casts, commercials, and documentaries are only a few of the ways in which issues such as sexual abuse are now addressed on television. While some Mennonites are not permitted to watch television, many Mennonites allow the viewing of television; this would be an ideal way to convey information, education and to create an awareness.

It was felt that the Mennonite community may need to be "shocked" into recognizing the existence of sexual abuse within the community. Some suggested showing very graphic commercials or using computerized scenes to depict the violence and vulgarity of sexual abuse. The use of computers would eliminate the need for actual people to re-enact a disturbing scene.

I appreciate the suggestion to use shock tactics in order to create awareness, yet based on past experience and knowledge of how the use of shock tactics has impacted on an issue, this may not be the most effective approach. The use of shock tactics may sensationalize the issue. It may also shock people into further denial. An alternative approach may be more suitable providing the seriousness of the issue is not minimized.



Written Material

As mentioned previously, written material is very important. It is important to provide written resources, pamphlets, information and stories in the languages that the community speaks. The level of education ranges from an elementary to university level. For this reason, the material needs to be written at a reading level that is comprehensible by all.

## Chapter VII

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine victim/survivor identified supports that would encourage the disclosure of intrafamilial sexual abuse. The study focused on women who were raised in Mennonite families and resided in a rural location. The data obtained could assist women who are victims of sexual abuse, therapists who counsel women who met the criteria of this study, Mennonite pastors, teachers and the Manitoba Department of Education, and the various organizations that are involved in providing support to members of rural Mennonite families and communities. This chapter presents the limitations of this study, recommendations, considerations for future research, and conclusions based on the findings of the research.

#### Limitations

First, the research was limited to those in therapy, and did not reach those who were not receiving treatment. There is no way of knowing how those not in therapy cope.

Second, the research relied on memory, and the perceptions of the participants may have been skewed

due to time that has elapsed between the abuse, and the present interviews.

Third, the research relied on the stories shared by each of the participants; stories that were accepted at face value and not verified by any other sources.

Fourth, the research was limited to those who have consciously remembered their abuse, and thus eliminates those who have repressed the memories of their abuse.

Fifth, the research was limited to those participants who were victims, and the study did not include a comparison group.

Sixth, the situation regarding disclosure may have changed since the participants left their home community. As the age of the participant increases, so does the possibility of the situation changing.

Seventh, this study was limited to those who may have been able to financially afford to seek therapy. This eliminated a portion of the socioeconomic population that may not have sought therapy due to financial inabilities.

Finally, this study was limited to those women that were able to seek support and therapy.

#### Recommendations

This study sought to determine the needs of women

who had been raised in Mennonite families and rural communities, and their suggestions to aid in the disclosure of intrafamilial sexual abuse. The data obtained from this study should be used as a basis for suggesting further research on the relevant community programs that would enhance the environment for disclosure, for providing justification for the need for funding to seek supports in the rural communities, and for proposing changes in the attitudes and beliefs of the Mennonite community as they relate to the issue of sexual abuse.

In retrospect, I sometimes found it difficult to separate issues that were related to being Mennonite and issues that were related to residing in a rural location. At times, these two aspects of this research study created some blending and confusion of the data, yet I put forth my best effort to maintain as clear an understanding of the participants' perspectives as possible.

If this research study were to be replicated, I would recommend the following changes be implemented. I would suggest that separate studies be conducted to examine the Mennonite issues and the rural issues. I would also suggest that a comparison group be interviewed to explore issues that may surface as

specific Mennonite or non-Mennonite issues.

This research study relied on the perspectives of eight individual women who met the criteria as defined by the study. Their stories were affected by their emotions; emotions that are valid and respected. Some of their responses conveyed emotions such as anger, fear, desperation, and hopelessness. As the researcher, I respect their contributions and perspectives on the issues that were discussed.

Further research may have increased credibility if the data collected in the interviews can in some way be verified. One suggestion is, with the permission of the participant, if the participant's therapist is willing to read and verify the data that is collected during an interview. The therapist may be aware of many of the issues that were discussed in the interview and may be able to verify the consistency of the information provided by the participant.

#### Considerations for Future Research

##### Female Perpetrators and Power

This study focused on women as victims and generally addressed men as the perpetrators. Young girls and women are not the only victims of sexual abuse, but also young boys and men. To not address the

victimization of men would be to deny it's existence. To assume that perpetrators are only men negates and further silences the experiences of those who have been sexually abused by women. Sexual abuse is an act of power and a violation of boundaries. Women are capable of this violation, as two women touched on in their interviews. Perpetrators choose to violate those who they know they will have power over. This may be a possible explanation as to why a culture that does not view women as having power include perpetrators who are women. On the contrary, maybe women do have more power than is perceived, yet this is an unacceptable expression of power. This is a question I cannot answer, yet is an area that may be considered for future study.

#### Violence verses Non-Violence

Based on the interviews, one of the suggested areas to explore is why violence exists in a community that is based on non-violent action. How such extreme violence infiltrated a pacifist community may be worthy of exploration.

#### Education System

I spoke with a representative from the Manitoba Department of Education who informed me that although the Family Life curriculum is optional, it is taught in

almost all Manitoba schools. In speaking randomly with young adolescents who are Mennonite and attend a rural school, they report that they have not received Family Life education. This may be worth exploring. It may also be valuable to examine the affect that the Family Life curriculum has on sexual abuse situations and disclosure in rural Mennonite communities.

#### Conclusions

At the onset of this study, I was very optimistic with regard to efforts that were being made by specific organizations to increase the awareness of sexual abuse, and to provide support and counselling to the various rural communities and residents of those communities. During the two years that I focused on this study, I came to realize that the awareness of sexual abuse is still minimal, and that attitudes and perceptions of sexual abuse remain somewhat unchanged.

As the results of this study emerged I found it very disturbing to see the close parallel that developed between the participants' descriptions of the typical Mennonite family and that of a family where sexual abuse by a relative occurs. There seemed to be many characteristics of a Mennonite family that could also be found in a family where sexual abuse by a

relative occurs, just as there are many characteristics of a family where sexual abuse occurs that may be found in a Mennonite family. I am in no way saying that sexual abuse exists in all or even a majority of Mennonite families, yet I do feel that due to many of the beliefs and practices as described in the interviews, the Mennonite family is more vulnerable to the existence of sexual abuse by a relative than a non-Mennonite family.

I believe that I found the parallel disturbing because I heard contradiction between the beliefs of the Mennonites and the actual behaviour and practices that were described. The purity that was expected was heavily tainted by the violence in the stories shared by the women. I examined a cultural, ethnic and religious group at an intense level when they are in fact, a microcosm within a macrocosm. When viewed from a distance, most cultural and religious groups would receive the same reaction because all groups have imperfections. They are a very unique group, yet this affirms that as a religious and cultural group, they are no different than any other group, making them just as susceptible to, and no less immune, to the existence of sexual abuse by a relative.

Based on the interviews, the participants all felt



that to some degree, the attitude and approach of the Mennonite church and family to sexual abuse by a relative impacted on their decision and ability to disclose. The lack of information and resources, and the nature of the rural setting only augmented the possibility of eternal silence.

The women voiced valid concerns that existed in their community while growing up; many of which continue to exist today. These concerns contribute to the silence of sexual abuse and to the decision to not disclose. Women described experiences of being shunned, condemned, ostracized, ridiculed, not being believed, and being blamed for the sexual abuse. They were betrayed by a community that is committed to serving those in need of help. Rather than receiving the support that was expected of their community, they were instead, re-victimized by their own community.

Presently, resources are limited, restricting the options available to the residents. If options do not exist, choices cannot be made. If information and education do not exist, informed choices cannot be made.

Qualified counsellors that are both Mennonite and non-Mennonite who are impartial and not immersed members of the community are minimal, forcing residents

to travel a considerable distance if they desire support. Shelters and safe houses are beginning to emerge, yet the nature of the rural setting makes it difficult to maintain anonymity.

I found that an aspect of counselling that is often offered to those seeking counselling, particularly Christian based counselling, is the focus on forgiveness. Based on my counselling experience, forgiveness is the client's option, and one that need not ever take place unless the client chooses to move in that direction. If forgiveness is to occur, the first person to forgive is themselves for ever thinking that they were responsible for the sexual abuse. Forgiveness of anyone else is the choice of the client and need not be directed by the counsellor.

Schools are teaching Family Life and Health programs and children are receiving some education and awareness on sexual abuse, yet the extent of that information is determined by the community, and not the Manitoba Department of Education. Even though children are receiving information and an awareness is being created, education needs to exceed the boundaries of schools and reach the entire community, providing a broader understanding of the many issues related to sexual abuse.

The Mennonite families living in rural communities, and the rural Mennonite communities have and are making efforts to create an environment that will exude enough safety and comfort to elicit disclosures of sexual abuse, yet considerable work and change still need to occur. The responses of the participants indicate a need for changes in attitudes, beliefs, balance of power between men, women and children, and the need for non-judgemental acceptance and support from the Mennonite families that reside in rural Manitoba.

As many women said though, there were times when nothing would have made them feel safe enough to disclose. This being the case, it is our responsibility as caring and concerned adults, to become informed and educated so that we may recognize signs, symptoms and indicators of sexual abuse. This would enable us to intervene when it is too painful for a victim to disclose.

To disclose sexual abuse means to expose your whole being and soul; to be subjected to questions, comments, and possible judgement and ridicule; to possibly submit yourself to further pain; and, to be left with the sometimes uncertainty of where to go and how to go about a healing process. It is my hope that

this study will enable the rural communities where Mennonite families reside to continue to grow, to educate, to be open to the new information, and to seek the necessary support in order to achieve an atmosphere of safety to enable disclosures and intervention to take place.

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**Appendix A**

Letter to Therapists

Deborah Handziuk  
Department of Educational Psychology  
Faculty of Education  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3T 2N2

Current Date

Therapist's Name  
Address

Dear (Therapist's Name):

I am sending this letter as a follow-up to our recent telephone conversation, at which time I explained my research study. I felt it would be beneficial for you to have a written copy of my request. As a reminder, I am an M.Ed. student in the Department of Educational Psychology, in the area of Counselling, and I would greatly appreciate your help in my research thesis.

I am examining the issue of sexual abuse among the rural Mennonite families to determine if there is any relationship between disclosure and:

- 1) Isolation and rural characteristics
- 2) Family traditions and beliefs
- 3) Community attitudes

I have chosen to examine the Mennonite community because they comprise a large portion of the rural and farm based population in Manitoba. An important part of the study is to determine what factors, from the perspective of the victim, were important or necessary for them to feel comfortable or safe enough to disclose. Many people suffer and endure abuse silently. This silence can be further isolated in a rural community. There may also be religious traditions or beliefs that inhibit a person from disclosing their abuse. By identifying the needs of the victim, we may be able to take steps toward changing the climate of the rural community that would enable victims to feel safe enough to emerge for support and help.

I am asking several therapists who practice within Winnipeg, as well as the non-urban areas of Manitoba, if they will participate in my study.

I would like to interview women to gather information on their view of what would have been helpful to them while growing up in their rural community with regard to disclosures of their abuse. I would appreciate if you could identify any female clients who you have in the past, or are presently meeting with:

- 1) Who grew up in rural Manitoba (rural being defined as non-urban Manitoba outside the city limits of Winnipeg, Brandon, Thompson, and Portage la Prairie).
- 2) Were raised in a home where at least the father, or both the parents identified themselves as Mennonite, and belong(ed) to a Mennonite church.
- 3) Was a victim of sexual abuse by a family member.
- 4) And, is between the ages of 18 and 30 years old.

Please examine the enclosed questionnaire, and interview schedule, so that you can decide if you would like to support, and cooperate in, my study.

Once you have selected suitable clients, please give them a Cover Letter/Consent Form (enclosed in this package) at which time they can decide if they feel comfortable, and are willing to participate in the study. Should they decide to participate, please ask your client to call me directly at home. This will ensure that should your client want to obtain further information, they may do so, while remaining anonymous.

I realize that this is a controversial subject, and that you must always consider the emotional health and readiness of your client first. Should you choose to not participate, I will understand fully. Either way, it would be very helpful if you could fill out the enclosed form and return it to me by \_\_\_\_\_.

If you would like more information on this study, please feel free to phone me at my home number,

My thesis advisor, Dr. Paul Madak, would also be happy to answer any questions. His phone number is

If you decide to take part, I would like to discuss with you the possibility of using your office for the interview. This would ensure privacy, confidentiality, and a comfortable setting for your client to share in.

Upon completion of the thesis, I will provide you, and each of the subjects, with a copy of the results.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Deborah Handziuk

**Appendix B**

Letter to Therapists

Deborah Handziuk  
Department of Educational Psychology  
Faculty of Education  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3T 2N2

Current Date

Therapist's Name  
Address

Dear (Therapist's Name):

I would like to introduce myself, Deborah Handziuk. I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Psychology, in the area of Counselling, and I would greatly appreciate your help with my research thesis.

I am examining the issue of sexual abuse among the rural Mennonite families to determine if there is any relationship between disclosure and:

- 1) Isolation and rural characteristics
- 2) Family traditions and beliefs
- 3) Community attitudes

I have chosen to examine the Mennonite community because they comprise a large portion of the rural and farm based population in Manitoba. An important part of the study is to determine what factors, from the perspective of the victim, were important or necessary for them to feel comfortable or safe enough to disclose. Many people suffer and endure abuse silently. This silence can be further isolated in a rural community. There may also be religious traditions or beliefs that inhibit a person from disclosing their abuse. By identifying the needs of the victim, we may be able to take steps toward changing the climate of the rural community that would enable victims to feel safe enough to emerge for support and help.

I am asking several therapists who practice within Winnipeg, as well as the non-urban areas of Manitoba, if they will participate in my study.

I would like to interview women to gather information on their view of what would have been helpful to them while growing up in their rural

community with regard to disclosures of their abuse. I would appreciate if you could identify any female clients who you have in the past, or are presently meeting with:

- 1) Who grew up in rural Manitoba (rural being defined as non-urban Manitoba outside the city limits of Winnipeg, Brandon, Thompson, and Portage la Prairie).
- 2) Were raised in a home where at least the father, or both the parents identified themselves as Mennonite, and belong(ed) to a Mennonite church.
- 3) Was a victim of sexual abuse by a family member.
- 4) And, is between the ages of 18 and 30 years old.

Please examine the enclosed questionnaire, and interview schedule, so that you can decide if you would like to support, and cooperate in, my study.

Once you have selected suitable clients, please give them a Cover Letter/Consent Form (enclosed in this package) at which time they can decide if they feel comfortable, and are willing to participate in the study. Should they decide to participate, please ask your client to call me directly at home. This will ensure that should your client want to obtain further information, they may do so, while remaining anonymous.

I realize that this is a controversial subject, and that you must always consider the emotional health and readiness of your client first. Should you choose to not participate, I will understand fully. Either way, it would be very helpful if you could fill out the enclosed form and return it to me by \_\_\_\_\_.

If you would like more information on this study, please feel free to phone me at my home number,

. My thesis advisor, Dr. Paul Madak, would also be happy to answer any questions. His phone number is

If you decide to take part, I would like to discuss with you the possibility of using your office for the interview. This would ensure privacy, confidentiality, and a comfortable setting for your client to share in.

Upon completion of the thesis, I will provide you, and each of the subjects, with a copy of the results.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Deborah Handziuk

**Appendix C**

## Reply Form

I. Please check one:

1. [ ] I am willing to contact clients who are suitable and meet the criteria for the study "The climate for disclosure: An examination of sexual abuse among rural mennonite families," provide each client with the information package that has been provided, and to instruct the person to contact you, Deborah Handziuk, by telephone.
2. [ ] I am NOT willing to contact clients for the purpose of research interviews by Deborah Handziuk for the study "The climate of disclosure: An examination of sexual abuse among rural mennonite families."
3. [ ] Before I make a decision, I would like more information on this study.
4. [ ] I have not met with, and do not presently meet with any clients who fit your research criteria.

II. Please fill in the section that corresponds with the number you checked above:

1. I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to contact any clients who I feel are suitable and meet the criteria for the study "The climate for disclosure: An examination of sexual abuse among rural mennonite communities," provide each client with an information package, and instruct each client to contact Deborah Handziuk by telephone.
2. Please state the reason(s) you would prefer not to take part in this study:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. If you would like to speak with me about this study, please state the time, place, or phone number:  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_  
Place: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Of those clients that I felt were suitable for your research study, \_\_\_\_\_# declined, and chose not to be interviewed.

III. Please complete:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Organization: \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D**

## Cover Letter/Consent Form

I am an M. Ed. student in the Department of Educational Psychology and I would like to ask you to participate in my research thesis of the experiences of women who grew up in rural Mennonite families and their perspective on the attitudes of family and community with regard to sexual abuse. By participating in an interview with myself, your viewpoint will provide valuable information in an area that we know very little about. The interview will take approximately two hours to complete.

The questions that I will be asking may be viewed as highly personal, and there is a possibility that you may be upset or offended at the content of some of the items. Please remember that your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose to not take part in this interview, and may choose to not answer any questions I will ask. You may also end the interview at any time.

If you agree to take part in an interview, please be assured that all the information gathered is confidential and anonymous. Your name will never appear anywhere, only a code, which only I will understand. There will be no way to associate your identity with the information you share. I would also like to ask for your permission to tape record (audio only) the information. I will be the only person to hear the tape, and the tape will be destroyed at the completion of the study. An audio tape allows me to transcribe the interview accurately. I will maintain the transcripts for up to 5 years after the date of completion and or publication, after which time, the transcripts will be destroyed. The transcripts will remain intact for the purpose of future research only, but will all be coded for confidentiality, and will always remain in my possession. I realize that this information is very sensitive and private, so I will guard the information with utmost care.

If you agree to be interviewed, or would like to receive more information before making a decision, please contact me at my home at . . . My thesis advisor, Dr. Paul Madak, would also be happy to answer any questions, and his phone number is . . . Even if you contact either one of us for more information,

your identity will be unknown to me until you share your name. Once you have made a decision, we can arrange to meet at a time and place that is suitable and comfortable for you.

Upon completion of this study, I will provide you with a summary of the results. You may want to discuss the results, or any questions, with your therapist, or you may call me directly.

If you read this letter and choose not to participate, please inform your therapist that you have chosen to decline.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Respectfully,

Deborah Handziuk

Consent Form

After having read this letter, I understand fully that this interview is voluntary, that I may terminate the interview when I choose to, and that I am not obligated to answer any questions, or say anything that I do not want to. I also agree to have the interview audio taped.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to take part in this research study, and to be interviewed by Deborah Handziuk.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher



**Appendix E**

Reminder Letter

Deborah Handziuk  
Department of Educational Psychology  
Faculty of Education  
University of Manitoba

Current Date

Therapist's Name  
Address

Dear (Therapist's Name):

Approximately two weeks ago you should have received information on my research thesis entitled The Climate for Disclosure: An Examination of Sexual Abuse Among Rural Mennonite Families. The information was given to you in order for you to decide if any of the clients who you meet with would be suitable for the study. If the selected women meet the criteria, then from a therapeutic perspective, do you feel comfortable with them being interviewed.

If you have already sent your reply, please disregard this note. If you happen to still have my request, and if you can find time in the next week, I would greatly appreciate you completing the reply form and mailing it to myself, Deborah Handziuk, in the self-addressed enveloped provided in the package.

I sincerely thank-you for your time.

Respectfully,

Deborah Handziuk

**Appendix F**

Interview Schedule

1. Provide 20 to 30 minutes for myself and the subject to relax and become comfortable with one another.
2. I will ask the subject if she has any further questions regarding the interview, and if she fully understands the interview protocol. If she says yes, I will ask that she sign the consent form to tape record the interview.
3. I will read the purpose, and a brief introduction, and then ask a number of Warm-Up questions about the participant's personal and family history (Appendix G).
4. I will ask the Interview Questions (Appendix H).
5. Following the interview, there will be a debriefing period. This will enable me to assess the participants's stability and level of stress, and to allow for the subject to relax. By building in debriefing time, the subject will know that they are not obligated to leave following the interview, knowing they will be able to spend time with a supportive person.
6. Prior to the interview, I will have suggested that the therapist be available for any necessary debriefing, should the participant feel a need to debrief further. Following the interview, should the therapist not be available immediately, the participant will be provided with a list or resources that she may contact for immediate support (Appendix I).
7. I will obtain a mailing address, or some way to contact the participants so that I may ensure that she receives a copy of the results.

**Appendix G**

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine what is necessary to aid in the disclosure of sexual abuse within a family in the rural Mennonite communities and families.

Before we begin the interview, I would like to remind you that this interview is voluntary, you do not have to say anything you do not choose to say, and you may terminate the interview at any time. You have consented in writing to have the interview audio taped, and I would like to remind you that I will be the only person to hear the tape, and read the transcript. I will code each transcript so that your name will never be associated with the interview, and any identifying names or places that you mention will be coded to protect your privacy.

Warm-Up Questions

1. What is your present age?
2. What is your present marital status, or the status of your relationship?
3. Do you have any children? If so, how many?
4. Where were you born?
5. Where did you grow up in Manitoba? Please explain if your home was located in a town, or farm location.
6. Do you still reside there?
  - A) If not, how old were you when you moved away from the community?
  - B) What motivated you to move away from the community?
7. Do your parents still reside there?
  - A) If not, when did they move?
  - B) Where did they move to?
  - C) What motivated your parents to move away from the community?
8. Do you have any brothers? If so, how many?
9. Do you have any sisters? If so, how many?

10. What position are you in the birth order of your siblings?
11. Are both you parents presently living?
12. Are your parents still married to one another?
13. If no, to 11 or 12, have they remarried?
14. a) How would you define the term Mennonite?  
b) What does being Mennonite mean to you?
15. Do you presently consider yourself a Mennonite?  
If so, do you presently attend the Mennonite church?
16. Are both your parents Mennonite? If not, which of the two is Mennonite?
17. What Mennonite conference do your parents presently belong to?  
A) Have they always belonged to that conference?  
B) If not, what conference did they previously belong to?  
C) What motivated them to leave the conference?

**Appendix H**

Interview Questionnaire

Preliminary

1. In what way is the person who sexually abused you related to you?
2. How old were you when this person first sexually abused you?
3. How old were you when the sexual abuse ended?
4. What ended the sexual abuse?

Part I

1. When did you first disclose and how old were you at the time?
2. Could you describe the person(s) that you first disclosed to?
  - A) How did you know them?
  - B) Were they from the same community as yourself?
  - C) If not, where were they from?
3. Have there been any other people you have disclosed to since that time?
  - A) How did you know them?
  - B) Were they from the same community as yourself?
  - C) If not, where were they from?
4. What motivated you to disclose?
5. Could you describe how you perceived the attitude and approach to sexual abuse by:
  - A) The Mennonite church?
  - B) Your family?
6. Did your decision to disclose have any relation to the attitude and approach to sexual abuse by:
  - A) The Mennonite church? Please explain.
  - B) Your family? Please explain.
7. A) What would you recommend to Mennonite churches to help others disclose?

- B) What would you recommend to Mennonite families to help others disclose?

Part II

In some sexual abuse instances, some people have described themselves as feeling isolated. By isolated, I mean that they felt very separate from the world around them, and that it was difficult for outsiders to enter into their family, and to know what was really going on within their family. Others have felt trapped, not knowing where to turn. The next few questions refer to isolation as described here.

1. During the time that the sexual abuse took place, did you ever feel isolated?  
\*(If no, move to Part III).
2. Did your feelings of isolation have any relation to your decision to disclose? Please explain.
3. What would you recommend to help or change the isolation?

Part III

I would like to move away from the issue of isolation, and talk about your awareness of sexual abuse in your community.

1. When you were growing up, were you aware of anyone else who had gone through the same kind of hurtful experiences as yourself?  
\*(If not, go to question #5).
2. If so, how did you become aware of their experiences?
3. Did the responses of others to this person affect you in any way? How?
4. Did your decision to disclose have any relation to your knowledge of others in the community who had been sexually abused? Please explain.

\*If questions 1 to 4 have been answered, omit question 5, and go on to question 6.

5. How did the fact that you were unaware of anyone else who had shared the same experience as you, affect you and your decision to disclose?

6. What recommendations would you make to:
  - A) Help those living in Mennonite families within rural communities to become aware of the issue of sexual abuse?
  - B) Help others who have, or are presently, experiencing sexual abuse within a Mennonite family residing in a rural community?

Part IV

1. Where did you first receive information about sexual abuse?
  - A) How old were you at the time?
2. Did your decision to disclose have any relation to your involvement with people or communities from outside your own? Please explain.
3. Do you have any recommendations that you would make with regard to community involvement around the issue of sexual abuse?

Part V

1. In looking back, what would have helped you to feel safe and comfortable enough to disclose while living in your home and community?
2. What suggestions or changes would you make to help those who have been sexually abused in rural Mennonite families?
3. What could be done in the rural Mennonite communities to create more awareness and understanding of sexual abuse?
4. What suggestions do you have for the rural Mennonite community to help address the concerns of those who have been sexually abused?

Thank you for taking the time to share about such a personal and sensitive topic. Should you feel a need to debrief further, please contact your therapist. If your therapist is not readily available, here is a list of resources where there are trained and qualified counsellors to provide immediate support for you (Appendix I).

**Appendix I**

## Resource Sheet

Now that you have completed the interview, you may feel like talking about your experiences or simply obtaining information on the topic of sexual abuse and disclosure. If you feel a need to debrief further, you may wish to meet with your therapist. If your therapist is not available immediately, you may wish to contact any one of the resources listed.

Counselling Services

There are several counselling services within Winnipeg that are excellent resources. These resources have experienced, qualified counsellors, who would be happy to listen, and talk with you.

- Women's Health Clinic  
3rd Floor 419 Graham Avenue  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
947-1517
- Klinik Community Health Centre  
Crisis Program Intake Worker (Friday mornings)  
870 Portage Avenue  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
784-4090
- Or you may prefer a more anonymous phone-in service such as the Sexual Assault Counselling line, 786-8631. This service is a part of Klinik Community Health Centre and is run by trained counsellors who will talk with anyone who has ever had any sexually abusive experience.

Other Community Resources

- Klinik Crisis Line: 786-8686  
(24 hour Crisis Telephone Service)
- Voices for Non-Violence  
Mennonite Central Committee  
134 Plaza Drive  
261-6381