News



Lisa Sharon Harper. (Courtesy of Lisa Sharon Harper)



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More than 140 evangelical Christian women from across the political and theological spectrums have signed onto a statement calling churches to end the silence around violence against women and the church's participation in it.

The statement, released Dec. 20, is accompanied by the hashtag #SilenceIsNotSpiritual and is part of a campaign that will run through Easter on April 1, 2018.

As for the church:

"There is no institution with greater capacity to create protected spaces for healing and restoration for survivors, as well as confession, repentance and rehabilitation for perpetrators," the statement reads.

Signers include pastors, professors, heads of parachurch organizations and popular authors and speakers such as Jen Hatmaker, Rachel Held Evans, Ann Voskamp, Amena Brown and Helen Lee.

The idea for the campaign calling evangelical churches to respond to physical, sexual and psychological violence against women came from Belinda Bauman of One Million Thumbprints, according to Lisa Sharon Harper of Freedom Road, who helped launch the #SilenceIsNotSpiritual campaign.

It follows the #ChurchToo movement — which, its creators are careful to note — grew out of #MeToo, a Twitter hashtag women have used to share their stories of sexual harassment and assault. #MeToo was started by social activist Tarana Burke and went viral this fall, as women in great numbers began to use the hashtag. By the thousands, they accused ordinary people — mostly men — but also famous people in politics, entertainment, journalism and other fields.

Burke recently appeared in Time Magazine's Person of the Year issue as one of 2017's "silence breakers."

"This 'now' is not a new 'now.' There have been generations of women in the church that have been saying exactly what we're saying for years," Bauman told RNS. "It just happens to be a moment of decision where the structures that be can listen or not."

In this moment, the statement proclaims, there is "a window of opportunity to bring healing in the world and in the church."

It calls for local churches to do two things. One is to "stand with women who experience violence" by creating opportunities for survivors of violence to share their stories and receive empathy and care. It also calls for churches to "stand up for women who experience violence" by advocating for them and examining — and repenting for — the church's role in perpetuating and covering up sexual abuse.

It's important for the church to get involved, it says, because Christians believe all people are created in the image of God, meaning violence against women is

violence against God.

Emily Joy, who created #ChurchToo with fellow artist Hannah Paasch, said sexual abuse is an "epidemic" in all spheres of life, but there's an "added level of trauma" when it occurs within a religious environment.

"It's one thing to say, 'I'm abusing you,' and it's another to say, 'I'm abusing you, and this is how God wants it,'" Joy said.

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Joy and Paasch also signed the statement.

Bauman and Harper first took the statement to women such as Lynne Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church who they considered "elder stateswomen" — those who have navigated evangelicalism's attitudes toward women for decades. From Saturday to Monday, the signatures came in from female evangelical leaders around the world.

"We're really looking at the full spectrum of evangelical thought out there. We have pretty conservative seminaries and denominations that are represented, along with some pretty egalitarian and progressive evangelicals, as well," Harper said.

"But with this, we decided to join hands under the banner of #SilenceIsNotSpiritual because we all are women. We've all experienced the pain of patriarchy, and some of us have experienced it more than others, having been ourselves survivors of gender-based abuse and gender-based violence."