# Facilitating Restorative Justice in Faith Communities Where Sexual Harms Occurred

*Alissa R. Ackerman, PhD[1]; Guila Benchimol, PhD[2]*

*[1]Associate Professor of Criminal Justice, California State University, Fullerton; [2]Director of Faith Based and Community Accountability, Ampersands Restorative Justice*

## Abstract

This paper outlines our work facilitating restorative justice processes with survivors and institutional leaders in faith groups or communities where sexual harms occurred. It explains why and how we turned a faith lens on restorative justice (RJ) cases in the Jewish world and in some Christian communities, and how we have engaged RJ with survivors of childhood sexual abuse in historical cases. We outline where and how we apply a faith lens in each phase of our five-phase model. We also outline some benefits and challenges facilitators must consider when using a faith lens to work with survivors harmed in faith communities.

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The impacts of sexual abuse that take place within institutions such as schools, synagogues, churches, and camps are often exacerbated by institutional betrayal. This occurs when institutions engage in harmful behavior that impacts individuals dependent on the institution (Smith & Freyd, 2014). This might include a lack of support for someone who has been harmed or a failure to prevent future harm from occurring. When child sexual abuse (CSA) occurs in a faith institution or organization, there may be a spiritual component to both the abuse and the betrayal that ensues (Hurley, 2004). Those who perpetrate sexual harm sow chaos in the lives of those they victimize. Those who have enabled perpetrators contribute to that chaos. For those who experience it, CSA has rippling impacts throughout their lives and relationships.

When CSA is enabled or covered up by an institution, the responsibility lies both with the individual perpetrator and the institution. This is especially so when the institution disregards the harm or moves a harm-doer elsewhere. These actions were revealed to have occurred in response to years of sexual abuse committed within the Catholic Church (John Jay College, 2004, 2006, 2011). Given the many revelations of CSA within faith spaces (Raine & Kent, 2019), we must seek remedies that ensure the safety of survivors and the wider community; address structural, cultural, and systemic issues conducive to sexual abuse; and prevent future sexual abuse, (Ackerman, McMahon, & Benchimol, 2025). One promising remedy or approach is restorative justice (RJ).

## Why Restorative Justice?

Restorative justice is a framework and a value set (Zehr, 2015). It is a way of being in relationship with others and an approach to addressing harm. While RJ has various definitions, we see it as a human-centered approach to repairing and preventing harm. This definition is particularly relevant in faith-based restorative processes and the Jewish spaces where we primarily conduct our RJ work. The Jewish tradition teaches that we are all made *betzelem elohim,* or in the Divine image (Genesis 1:27; Stein, 2006). Regardless of the harm we cause or have endured, our humanity should never be doubted. Seeing one's humanity does not excuse or justify sexual abuse or even forgive it. Instead, it enables us to build relationships that foster active accountability for the harm in service of survivors and their unique needs. This can help us create safer communities rather than

ignoring the harm and harm-doers or moving them to another community where they may perpetrate again. For survivors, victimization can feel like a stripping away of one's inherent dignity. This can be reinforced by how survivors are perceived and treated in the public, media, and their communities. Restorative processes can be a tool to help remind all parties of the human dignity of each individual, even after they have been harmed or have caused harm, in an effort to restore and heal.

Restorative justice refers to a framework of practices or a value set that guides practitioners as they create unique and individualized processes. These processes differ from typical criminal justice or ethics processes. For example, criminal justice and ethics processes typically focus on the statute or code that was violated, who violated the code, and what the punishment or consequence should be for violating the statute or code. There is very little space in such processes for the needs of the person who experienced the violation. Restorative justice processes focus on who was harmed, meeting their needs, and determining whose obligation it is to meet those needs (Zehr, 2015). As such, practitioners ask a specific set of questions to address harm. Practitioners ask: Who has been harmed? What are their needs? Whose obligation is it to meet those needs? They focus on addressing the causes of the behavior, engaging relevant stakeholders, and attempting to make things as right as possible (Zehr, 2015). Restorative justice addresses harm and its impacts, not law or code violations. There can still be consequences for such violations, but that is not the primary purpose of restorative justice. Importantly, no two processes will look the same because restorative processes focus on stakeholders' unique needs. We are two criminologists and restorative justice practitioners who have dedicated our careers to understanding sexual harm. One of us studies victimization, and the other studies perpetration. We are also both Jewish women who are ourselves victims of sexual abuse. One of us was a Jewish educator for over a decade, and the other led a synagogue community. Our Jewish faith values inform how we live our lives and how we conduct our work. It is why we imagined what it might look like to utilize a restorative approach to creating bridges between survivors and those who harmed them in Jewish spaces. We believed we could address several unique challenges through such a lens.

We began this work in the Jewish world, working with Jewish survivors of sexual harm, Jewish harm-doers, and Jewish institutional leaders under whose watch or care abuses had occurred. Upon request, we have expanded our work to church communities. Several of the cases we have worked on involved adults seeking accountability and repair from the faith institutions where they were sexually abused as minors. Among the challenges, we noticed that survivors in faith communities were equally or more aggrieved by the institutional leaders who failed them than they were with their primary harm-doers. Simultaneously, institutional leaders were looking to understand why survivors held them accountable and to do right by survivors responsibly. Additionally, survivors and institutional leaders were often living and functioning within the same faith community, frequently seeing one another and having mutual friends or colleagues who were also impacted by the abuse and its aftermath.

We also found that individual harm-doers were not taking accountability for their behavior. Some harm-doers were unable or unwilling to do so. Others were part of faith communities unprepared to accept their repair or did not believe it was genuine. While faith communities spoke about repentance and self-improvement, community members sought to excommunicate harm-doers from their Jewish spaces. To be clear, there are times when the most appropriate action for the community's safety is the removal of the harm-doer. This is especially so in cases of CSA. However, harm-doers were not going anywhere. They remained in the faith community with no accountability or support to take necessary steps for change. Meanwhile, the harm ricochets on individual lives and on that of the faith community.

Survivors shared with us that they had little interest in dialoguing or engaging with those who directly harmed them in any way. They were far

more concerned with the institutional harm they experienced and wanted accountability from the leaders of those institutions. For example, the majority of CSA survivors we have worked with sought answers from those to whom they reported the abuse and about what was done following their disclosures. They also wanted information about whether and how their records related to the abuse, disclosures, or interventions were kept. However, in many cases, records of the abuse were not made, or maintained, mandated reporting was neglected, primary harm-doers were no longer alive or reachable to take accountability, and institutional leadership had changed over the years since the abuses were committed. Nevertheless, survivors abused as children were seeking redress.

The same was true for the parents of CSA survivors who wanted to confront and get accountability from those to whom they entrusted their children. They, too, have been impacted by the abuse their children endured, and they are "secondary victims" (Karmen, 2019). We believe that RJ offers a framework to bring survivors and institutional leaders in faith communities together for accountability and repair processes that could also include members of their communities.

Research shows that RJ is an effective approach to addressing violent crime for both survivors and those who cause harm. For example, survivors who go through restorative processes are more satisfied with the process than those who go through a traditional criminal legal process (Latimer, Dowden, Muise, 2005). They are also more satisfied with how their cases are handled (Sherman, Strang, Barnes, et al., 2015). Importantly, restorative processes are effective at reducing the fear of repeat victimization and symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Angel et al., 2005; Sherman, Strang, Mayo-Wilson, et al., 2015). Restorative processes are also effective at reducing recidivism among those who perpetrate violent offenses (Sherman, Strang, Mayo-Wilson, et al., 2015).

## Restorative Justice Following Sexual Harm

While the literature on RJ and sexual harm is not as robust as the literature above related to violent offenses, the literature that does exist is promising. Satisfaction rates among survivors of sexual harm who participate in restorative processes are high (Koss, 2014). This is true among survivors of sexual assault (Koss, 2014), child sexual abuse (Julich & Landon, 2017), and incest (Klar-Chalamis & Peleg-Koriat, 2021). These studies also find that restorative processes meet survivors' justice and healing needs in ways that traditional criminal legal processes do not. The literature on restorative justice in cases of child sexual abuse is small, though Cross and his colleagues (2020) reviewed the existing literature and found that restorative justice options do exist for children who have experienced sexual abuse (for example, see Bolitho & Freeman, 2016; Gal, 2011). As in adult cases, there are best practices for facilitating and necessary conditions to be met that make restorative processes safe for everyone. Facilitator skills, proper suitability and readiness assessments, and flexibility and responsiveness are integral to successful processes (Cross et al., 2020, citing Bolitho & Freeman, 2016). These best practices are similar to those articulated by Burns & Sinko (2023) for adult sexual assault cases.

Still, there are concerns about using RJ in cases of sexual harm, including CSA, in individual and institutional settings. Concerns include fears of reinforcing power differentials, prioritizing the needs of the (mostly) men who perpetrate sexual harm over (mostly) women who experience it, and secondary victimization (Acorn, 2004; Daly, 2006). Power differentials are a distinct concern in child sexual abuse cases (Cossins, 2008), especially those that occur within faith-based institutions. Indeed, Cossins (2008) further argues that the RJ process can recreate relationship dynamics of power, control, and manipulation. We, too, have found this to be the case in some situations where the RJ process exacerbated

"existing power differentials between survivors and organizational leaders" (Benchimol & Ackerman, 2024a, p. 20).

Still, one crucial reason why we believe RJ is a path toward healing, justice, and prevention is that it re-humanizes the individuals involved . In their seminal book *Sexual Citizens,* Hirsch and Khan (2020) discovered that sexual encounters on college campuses involve one party to the experience viewing the other as an object in their sexual project, not as another person. This is most certainly also true in CSA cases, as children cannot consent and are used as objects at the disposal of the harm-doer. Survivors often see harm-doers as monsters, and harm-doers fail to see those they harm as fully human. RJ brings our inherent humanity back to the center and serves as the impetus for change. While we caution against putting a child who has experienced sexual abuse in an RJ process with an adult who harmed them, the literature shows that there are programs around the world that do engage in these practices with success (see Bolitho & Freeman, 2016; Gal, 2011). In our practice, we address historical cases where the victim-survivor is now an adult. We can explore restorative options more fully if it is the survivor's will.

## Faith and Relationships in the Restorative Justice Triad

Restorative processes seek to engage all relevant stakeholders in a given harm. In institutional processes, this can create a complex web of people with whom practitioners must engage. A simplified way to think about the parties to a restorative process is the "restorative justice triad," which includes the person or people who were harmed, the person or people who caused the harm, and members of the harmed and harm-doer's community. Using the concept of the triad recognizes that harm inflicted on individuals ripples across their relationships and communities. Secondary victimization by community members and to them must be addressed in addition to addressing the harm to the survivor. Restorative processes create opportunities for repairing these relationships or creating accountability where it has ceased to exist. Indeed, the Reverend Dr. Danielle Tumminio Hansen (2024), drawing on the work of Susan Brison (20002) and Judith Herman (1992), writes that healing and meaning-making happen in the presence of others. Similarly, in speaking about her experiences of vicarious restorative justice, Ackerman (2018) notes that "healing from intimate harm requires connection."

Martin Buber was a Jewish philosopher, author, and activist who argued that life has meaning because of our connections to other humans. His most famous writings on the "I-Thou" relationship are paramount to understanding the importance of relationships in restorative processes (Buber, 1937). When two people fully and authentically show up for one another, a new dimension, "the between," is created, and the relationship "becomes greater than the individual contributions of those involved" (Martin & Cowan, 2019). I-Thou relationships require mutuality, respect, and authentic presence. These are the essential ingredients to an RJ encounter as well. Mutual, respectful, and authentic encounters drastically differ from "I-It" transactional encounters, characterized by seeing other human beings as objects or a means to an end. As we noted, sexual harm often occurs because those who abuse view those they victimize as objects to use to meet their needs. Using Buber's approach, RJ processes can be the lens and the container through which all parties can truly see the full humanity of each participant in the moments of the 'in-between'—the listening and learning that lead to the RJ encounter.

We have worked with almost 20 faith institutions in the Jewish and Christian worlds, including large denominations, seminaries, religious non-profits, and large and small congregations. Because every survivor's experience and response to it is unique, in cases with multiple survivors, we have seen a range of choices about whether and how to stay connected to one's faith community. We have worked with survivors who disconnected from their faiths or faith communities due to the abuses they endured

or to the poor responses from the faith institutions or communities they turned to afterward. We have also worked with survivors who have remained deeply connected to their faith communities. These differing views of faith by survivors harmed in faith institutions (Vera-Gray, 2023) mean we must be sensitive, careful, and discerning about whether and how to apply RJ through a faith lens. Indeed, Vera-Gray (2023) writes that some survivors who were sexually abused within faith institutions experience a profoundly negative impact on their spiritual well-being, while others find that their faith provides comfort.

## Language of Faith

One does not need to use Buber's faithful language to help survivors and institutional leaders understand how paramount relationships and relationship building are to RJ. This is because the language of faith can be helpful or harmful in RJ processes in faith communities. Using the language of faith with those who have left religion behind or for whom religion was used as a tool to abuse can cause more harm. Survivors who were sexually harmed within faith institutions tell us that more harm is caused when faith leaders and community members use the language and practices of faith as spiritual manipulation or to silence them. For example, using the language of forgiveness without any true accountability causes further harm. Harm also occurs when faith leaders fail to live up to the values they espouse or that their organizations adopt. Silencing survivors for "the good of the church" or faith group is a form of spiritual gaslighting that has severe implications (Gavrielides & Coker, 2005). This can remind survivors of the initial abuse and requests to stay silent because of faith that were asked of them. Therefore, care should be taken when speaking to survivors to ensure that the language of faith does not alienate them from the RJ process.

That said, Buber provides a valuable framework for understanding the language used by faith leaders and practitioners. We have found that using faith-related language or terminology with institutional leaders can help RJ processes along. For example, using the language of faith and lessons from biblical texts has allowed us to connect with faith leaders, build trust, frame RJ concepts in a familiar language, and guide them toward true accountability. Interestingly, we have found that the Jewish faith institutions we have worked with do not necessarily understand institutional sexual abuse through a faith lens. However, their work with us helps them to see the connection between institutional sexual abuse and faith and institutional responsibility and faith. We connect faith to our work with them by teaching Jewish texts and values about abuses of power, sexual harm, accountability, repair, and restoration and asking institutional leaders to reflect on the parallels. We also remind them of their stated institutional mission, vision, and values and ask them where they align or misalign with restorative justice. This helps them integrate their accountability and restorative work with their larger mission.

It is clear that the language of faith is much more important to and effective with institutional leaders than it is for survivors. This makes it easier or more natural for them to understand that RJ and meeting survivor needs are part and parcel of what they should do as a faith institution. Ultimately, however, the parties to a process guide our decision-making about applying a faith lens.

## Faith and the Model

Faith can be applied to restorative justice accountability and repair work in several ways and at several moments if appropriate and desired by all parties. We adopted a five-phase model consistent with best practices (Burns & Sinko, 2023). We modified and updated that model over time to address the increasing complexities of institutional cases. The below phases generally occur in chronological order, although sometimes phases occur concurrently.

- Phase I: Initial Contact and Institutional Readiness
- Phase II: Request for Listening Sessions/Survivor Readiness
- Phase III: Preconference Work
- Phase IV: RJ Process(es) and Encounters
- Phase V: Follow-up and Debrief

Below, we outline how we apply a faith lens to each phase when survivors and institutions desire it. We also discuss the challenges we face at each phase and the risks that arise.

In Phase I, we hear from institutional leaders seeking restorative processes. We learn more about the institution, the abuses that took place, whether and how faith played a role in the abuse, and the institutional response. This helps us determine the learning we must cover with them in later phases, including how much of that curriculum we will base in faith. We also determine whether institutions are prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to engage in restorative processes with survivors and whether we believe they will persist in the challenging work ahead.

Our work typically involves historical cases of sexual abuse that were handled inappropriately or not dealt with at all. In some instances, institutional leaders reach out because a fact-finding investigation recommends restorative options for survivors or because their community is asking them to respond to the abuse. Most of the sexual abuse cases we encounter involve a member (or members) of the clergy who sexually abused members of the faith community. However, some have included faith leaders who are not clergy members but worked for faith institutions and used their position and authority to abuse. Understanding the faith community and the role of primary and secondary harm-doers in the community is an integral part of this phase. This helps us determine whether or not we are the right fit for the process or whether we should be referring to facilitators who would be better suited to meet the needs of the faith group. Based on what we hear, we assess whether or not the institution is ready to engage in a process. Sometimes, we recommend steps an institution can take to become prepared.

This does not come without challenges and risks. Because the institution is the one paying for restorative justice processes, this can also lead survivors to believe that the client is the institution rather than the process itself. An additional challenge is that it is hard to truly know whether an institution is ready to engage in a process before being able to identify survivor needs or even whether restorative justice is something they are seeking. Exploring a process by initial conversations with an institution can lead to mistrust with survivors. Another risk is that, because of these challenges, we may be unable to build trust with survivors and advocates. A lack of trust stalls progress in a process.

In Phase II, we assess whether survivors are interested in participating in a restorative justice process. We listen to them talk about the harm they experienced, who they feel is responsible, and how the institution might meet their restorative, healing, and justice needs. We seek to understand how faith may have harmed them and how a faith lens needs to be embedded in the curriculum we will develop for Phase III. It is in these listening sessions that we commonly hear about the impact that the abuse or its aftermath had on survivors' relationships with their faiths, faith communities, or God. This is important to understand because survivors explain why they hold the institution and its leadership accountable for the harm that befell them or for its aftereffects on their lives. They are often seeking repair for the impact of abuse with which they continue to live. Some want to return to their faith communities or institutions. Others never left but want to be more comfortable interacting with the people in them or with the leadership. Still, others wish for restorative processes with the faith institution but do not wish to continue their relationship with the faith group. We often issue a public report or letter outlining what we heard from survivors and our recommendations for the next restorative steps (see Benchimol & Ackerman, 2023, 2024b).

## Facilitating Restorative Justice

The challenges and risks in Phase II include engaging with survivors who may not understand the goals of restorative justice or those who seek outcomes that are antithetical to restorative justice. For example, some survivors want civil suits or criminal justice responses outside our purview. Similarly, another challenge involves working with groups of survivors whose needs and goals differ or are even contradictory. Survivors may be capable of sharing their needs and goals but are not prepared or ready to participate in restorative processes. Therefore, a risk is engaging with survivors who are not emotionally or otherwise ready to participate when even expressing this to them may cause harm. Additionally, there is a challenge in balancing the assurance that survivors' voices are heard with the confidentiality that institutions want to maintain.

While we meet regularly with participants throughout the process, Phase III is where most of our face-to-face and education work occurs. In Phase III, we create and deliver tailor-made curricula that prepare all parties for larger restorative processes where they sit together and hear from one another. We talk about the values of restorative justice, the faith group we are working with, and the institution. We discuss the similarities between their faith values and RJ values. Sometimes, we use biblical texts to illustrate how power can be abused or used for good. For example, we have drawn upon the biblical stories of Dinah's rape (Genesis 34:1-31) and Joseph's experience of sexual harassment (Genesis 39:1-20) in our teaching to discuss gendered responses to sexual harm as well as how bystanders and others respond to victims. We have also asked faith leaders to bring their examples from religious texts that speak to RJ and accountability. Additionally, we have expanded more broadly on texts about hypocrisy, communal responsibility, and gender as they relate to religion. Survivors have appreciated knowing that institutional leaders are learning this way. Some have even recommended how to deliver the message to faith leaders that RJ and faith values are tied.

In this phase, we also work to prepare survivors for the RJ encounter with institutional leaders. We teach survivors about what RJ is and entails and, when appropriate and desired, will do so using a faith lens as we do with institutional leaders. Indeed, survivors have shared that the learning they have done with us using a faith lens has brought them the "spiritual healing" they have sought. We also take the time to make the necessary inquiries about whether and how they want faith to play a role. For example, we ask whether they want prayer to be included and whether they want the process to occur in a religious setting. In one case, we ran the encounter in a chapel. We also ask which faith leaders they want present and who they prefer to speak first. These inquiries help give survivors agency and help us create the questions that will be asked, which may include questions about the spiritual impacts the abuse had on their lives.

One of the challenges we faced in this phase was recognizing the need to develop a curriculum for survivors too. We teach faith leaders that faith responses may harm survivors; likewise, we risk losing survivors' trust in us and the process if we rely too heavily on faith sources or language or if we include materials they do not want to learn about in our curriculum with them. Another challenge is when each party wants to know what takes place in the other's learning sessions with us and what they share. At the end of this phase is where we determine whether the parties are ready to move forward with an RJ encounter. This is a risky decision because the learning that we do in this phase can be triggering and lead people to become dysregulated prior to the encounter. We must, therefore, tread carefully and have had to pause processes at this stage.

The RJ encounter takes place in Phase IV. These encounters can be made up of varying constellations of the RJ triad and can take many forms, bound only by how creative all parties are willing to be. They provide opportunities for survivors to talk openly about the abuse they suffered and the impact it had on their lives. These may be survivor-only circles, small circles involving faith leaders and survivors where community members and partners watch and listen, or meetings of institutional leaders to process their accountability work. We have also led a process where

survivors were in circle, and institutional leaders listened. This was followed by a circle for institutional leaders where survivors watched and listened. We have also led 1:1 encounters between individual survivors and faith leaders. Each of these encounters has been powerful for both parties directly involved and those serving as witnesses and support people.

In encounters where survivors and faith leaders sit together, it is essential that faith leaders listen and, using the material they have learned about with us in previous phases, respond in restorative and healing ways to survivors. For example, after we issued a report outlining survivors' harms and the needs from a faith institution highlighting the need for a full-throated apology taking accountability, the institutional leader issued a public video apology naming the harms within the institution. His apology was rooted in the liturgy of the High Holiday service outlining harms committed between people. In another situation, we led a restorative conversation between parents of survivors and faith leaders. In these conversations, we co-created restorative options and accountability measures with participants. Those restorative measures became the basis for our recommendations for the faith institution more broadly. Parents of survivors expressed feeling heard and seen in those meetings.

Faith leaders must lean into their values as they share with survivors what they have learned and want to say in response. Where appropriate, we may begin or end the encounter with a prayer or poem, and there have been instances where survivors have asked everyone in the circle to pray together before we start. We give much thought to setting the right tone for the encounter. We invite everyone to name their intentions for our time together and write them on cue cards, which we place in the middle of the circle. Often, in cases with faith institutions, those values are faith-based.

Rabbi Jill Berkson Zimmerman wrote two prayer poems that we have used in the past. Both recognize the importance of sacred relationships and how sexual abuse damages these relationships. One blesses those who speak the unspoken and asks that we create safe, sacred, and accountable communities that can hold difficult truths while seeing the Divine in each person. The other asks for strength for those who speak up and that each community be emboldened to "examine itself" and "shine the light on abusive power" (Zimmerman, 2017a; 2017b). Whether in Jewish or Christian spaces, these poem-prayers have resonated with survivors and institutional leaders.

One challenge is ensuring that the encounter has been adequately co-created while the parties have still not come together. A risk is that they do not prepare themselves, using the tools we have provided before they walk into the encounter. Additionally, while we work with survivors on telling their experiences of harm at the encounter and with faith leaders on responding appropriately and empathically to those experiences, we ultimately have no control over what they choose to say in the moment. This can cause harm, and we have seen this happen. An important risk to note is that a process can unfold, everyone can be prepared, and yet it does not meet the needs of the survivor or the institution.

Phase V is where we debrief the process with each party, which might mean helping institutions figure out what and how much to share with their wider faith communities about the process they underwent. It may also mean helping them privately process the entire experience through their faith lens. For survivors, it is here where we learn how and whether the RJ process met their needs and expectations and how that impacted them more broadly. We have heard from survivors about wanting a spiritual guide or enrolling their children in faith-based spaces after the process. Sometimes, the RJ process leads survivors to re-engage with their faith or faith group. Re-engagement sometimes occurs when survivors have been recognized, acknowledged, heard, and offered what they feel is true accountability, apologies, and amends by the institution. However, by no means is re-engagement with the faith community the goal of RJ in faith-based spaces.

While the debrief may be understood to be the end of a process, it can be a place to explore further

accountability measures. A main challenge is ensuring institutions follow through with their commitments to survivors during the encounter. This often requires the inclusion of other stakeholders and decision-makers with competing goals and interests. Additionally, survivors are often left out of these post-encounter decisions, which causes them additional harm. While it may feel risky for institutions to include survivors in these decisions, the debrief process allows them to continue engaging restoratively with survivors.

To mitigate the challenges and risks we face throughout each phase, we work diligently to co-create each process and tailor it to the needs of the individuals involved. For example, we create leadership teams for processes with multiple survivors and have a survivor be part of that team. We continually refer to our iterative assessments of each party to ensure they continue being ready. We engage in active listening and pivot as necessary. We are transparent and honest with those we work with, even when what we have to share may be difficult to hear. We remind everyone of the goals of restoration, healing, and justice. We honor the humanity and dignity of each individual before us.

## Conclusion

We have been facilitating faith-based RJ processes for six years. Each case has provided meaningful learning and growth opportunities for us as facilitators. We have heard it has done the same for those we have worked with. We have asked survivors about their experiences with us as facilitators. Four themes emerge from this question. First, most survivors feel seen and heard by us. They believe we are working in their interest to achieve institutional accountability by teaching institutional leaders, pushing for organizational change, and asking for specific needs to be met. Second, some survivors become disillusioned by the process because they do not see institutional leaders moving as quickly or as far as they would like. They can separate their satisfaction with us as facilitators from their feelings about the process. Third, however, some survivors become frustrated or angry with us. Some have provided helpful and constructive feedback on how we can improve our process or our communication. Others feel angry and hurt by decisions we have had to make in service of the larger project and the people involved. Fourth, some survivors never come to the table in the first place, as their distrust of the institution that harmed them remains high.

Institutional leaders have also provided feedback. Most are grateful for the learning we have provided that has helped guide them toward institutional accountability or to see survivors of historical abuse with more empathy and compassion. Most feel equipped to handle future disclosures. Some have been frustrated by the time it takes to get through a process but recognize that taking the time leads to better outcomes. One client was concerned that there was little communication after the debrief process for us to help them through decision-making and implementation. There have been instances where institutions have decided not to continue through a process because of the cost, the backlash in the community, or the inability to follow through with recommendations. There have also been cases where we chose to end the relationship because the institution was not prepared to engage restoratively or continued to harm survivors. In the few instances where our engagement ended, it has always been on professional terms with the option for the institution to reach out when they are better prepared.

We learn from every individual and institution with whom we work. Each case helps us adjust and refine how we co-create meaningful and effective processes. Similarly, each case helps us to apply faith lessons to our RJ practice more robustly. However, it is essential to remember that every case will be different and unique, as no two people or communities are the same. We must be humble as we begin and move through a case, as people within a given community or organization are the experts in their community. We must learn from them throughout the process. We must also be nimble. The needs of participants change throughout our time together. We must be willing and able to move with them as needs develop

and change. Notably, there are many other ways a faith lens can be integrated into RJ; this paper reflects how we have applied it.

Still, cases of historical child sexual abuse in faith settings present challenges for RJ. We are mindful of the harm that can come from participating in a process like this, regardless of an individual's role. It is one of the reasons we use iterative assessments. We continually check in, approach all work in survivor and human-centered ways, and co-create processes to promote participants' agency. Still, despite our best efforts, sometimes harm occurs. In some instances, we must pause processes because a party to the process has had setbacks, and this can be frustrating and disempowering. We must remind participants that we do not "side" with any one party. Our allegiance is to the overall process, ensuring everyone is safe and prepared to move forward. Sometimes, the institutional leadership lacks preparation, goodwill, and the ability to execute the necessary steps to meet survivor needs. Other times, the survivor(s) goals and desires are not aligned with restorative values. Both instances require us to reassess whether a process can move forward.

Whether or not we use a faith lens in our RJ work with those harmed in faith-based settings, for a process to be successful all parties must have faith in themselves, one another, the facilitators, and the process itself. Just as healing after abuse is not linear, neither is the RJ process. Participants have to weather the ups and downs; it can be challenging for them to persist. Our faith in survivors and institutional leaders has only grown over the years we have watched them do so. While we recognize that institutional RJ is not for everyone or every situation, we hope our model offers a modicum of restoration, healing, justice, and accountability to survivors seeking it.

Faith is powerful. When used appropriately and as desired in restorative justice processes it can also be healing. Participants have expressed that encounters have felt "phenomenal," "profound," and miraculous. We know that this is because of how they showed up for the process and all of the difficult work they did to get there. We are always honored to be afforded the opportunity to watch this happen and be a part of such holy work. ■

## Author Bios

***Alissa R. Ackerman, Ph.D.**, is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at California State University, Fullerton and owner of Ampersands Restorative Justice. She is a "pracademic" and "survivor scholar" in that she incorporates her academic training, practitioner, and personal experiences with sexual violence in her work. Alissa writes extensively on topics related to sexual violence, sexual offending, and sex crime policies in academic journals, books, and OpEds. She is an internationally sought-after speaker, consultant, and trainer. Along with Casey Ballinger, MSW, Alissa is the co-recipient of the 2024 Gail Burns-Smith Award.*

***Dr.Guila Benchimol** is a criminologist, educator, and victim advocate who works with survivors, faith institutions, and leaders to prevent and address sexual violence and other abuses of power. She has been the Senior Advisor on Research and Learning at the SRE Network (Safety, Respect, and Equity) since she helped guide its launch in 2018. Guila is also the Director of Faith-Based and Community Accountability at Ampersands Restorative Justice. She holds a PhD in Sociological Criminology from the University of Guelph and is a trained restorative and transformative justice facilitator.*

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