



Listening & Learning: Stories of Survivors

Hope and Healing in the Diocese of Albany

A Conversation with Mike Koplinka-Loeher

November 16, 2023

The Hope and Healing Committee had the privilege to listen to Mike Koplinka-Loeher as he shared his story of abuse and the impacts it has had and continues to have in his life. He graciously responded to the committee's invitation to help us understand how abuse has lifelong effects.

Mike is the fourth of eight children in his family. He was born and raised in Ithaca, NY in the Diocese of Rochester. His family briefly moved to Texas where his mother worked for the Diocese of Austin and his family was deeply engaged in the church.

He later moved back to Ithaca and attended a retreat at the Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua, NY when he was 15. It was there he was abused by a priest from the Diocese of Syracuse. The abuse continued until he got married at the age of 24.

Mike articulated that the abuse impacts him each and every day. The effects of abuse are long-term and have lifelong implications. When he was younger and trying to understand his abuse, he began stealing as an expression of his anger. He was later caught stealing and sent to counseling, and he has continued counseling ever since.

His journey to forgiveness and healing has included therapy and support groups for male survivors. In 2002, he came to a place where he felt he could forgive his abuser. He reached out to his abuser's twin sister with hopes of being connected with his abuser, but was told that his abuser had since died.

He went to a library and checked out all the books he could find on male sexual abuse so that he knew what lay ahead of him. He thought he could get past all the hurt and memories, but soon realized it would never be over. The pain and hurt will be with him until his dying day. It is still difficult for him to forgive the institutional church, describing the challenges he has trying to reconcile with an institution when the institution refuses to help.

Mike stressed that looks can be deceiving and that his outside appearance often doesn't match the struggle he is fighting on the inside. He has been married to his wife since he was 24 years old, and now they have 4 grown children. He had a career in public relations and eventually held elected positions on the school board and then in his community. It takes hard work to hide his internal turmoil and he points out that you cannot always identify a survivor of abuse by their appearance or their demeanor. The global statistics of 1 out of 4 girls and 1 out of 6 boys have experienced



sexual abuse before the age of 18 indicate that we encounter survivors everyday and never know their suffering.

Mike has struggled with sharing his pain. Sometimes he felt no one could handle it or help him and it was a struggle to allow his wife to see him vulnerable because he felt she wouldn't understand and that he had to bear the burden and not burden others. He stressed that it is important to have a safe space to let go and be vulnerable, to be with someone who will listen and not try and fix the problem or you. Survivors need someone to accompany them. This is a long-term commitment.

He said that everyone needs somebody who is crazy about them. He and his wife tried to do that for their children. They wanted to make sure their children understood how important they were to him and his wife. Both Mike and his wife worked part-time so they could be more available and involved with their children.

Mike spoke of the difficulties of being a male survivor of sexual abuse. Men are sometimes more hesitant to share or admit their abuse to other people because of stigma, fear of homophobia, societal silence on the topic of abuse, and the sense of shame and feeling guilty that the abuse was their fault gets in the way. It is often taboo to talk about the sexual abuse of males. Mike said that it is important to continue to offer men a safe space to share their story and be open to hear their abuse and trauma. Men don't always participate initially so it is important to always be available and ready to listen. There should be additional services available for male survivors.

He recommends that we acknowledge that there are many ways survivors navigate the healing journey and there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to therapy and healing. Diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator (VAC) offices tend to stick to conventional treatment and often only agree to cover talk therapy and not mind/body services such as those that bring relief and healing to the physical body. He believes the abuse affects the whole body and the whole body should be treated, and also stresses that often not only does the survivor need services, but the family and loved ones of the survivor need help. This should be something paid for by the diocese.

Mike also shared that he has struggled with the diocese of his abuser because although the diocese knew of his abuse in 2002, he only found out in 2018 that his counseling could be reimbursed.

He has found great support and help through Awake, an organization focused on the care for abuse survivors, their families, and the Catholic Church, and now volunteers with them by facilitating survivor circles. As he grows in his healing, he is more able to give back to others and walk with other survivors.

Mike believes that more emphasis should be placed on listening, and not just listening to the survivor but also to the clergy and the people in the pews. There should be regular listening sessions, possibly a once a month gathering to check in and see how people are doing. These are not therapeutic sessions but an open and safe space where people are free to share. To accomplish this, Mike suggested that

we train people to listen without reacting and without judgement. People need to be comfortable with hearing strong emotions. It is important to express your feelings without being judged or having someone try to calm you down, and it is also important to have a place with a person/people who allow you to release your extreme emotions. Training people to listen without reacting allows the survivor to be heard and supported. Nothing is expected of the survivor – no resolution, just release. This also gives the survivor a safe space to show strong emotion. This can bring grounding and comfort.

Mike offered a final suggestion saying that although it is good that the Church has developed programs to try and prevent future abuse, he believes that it is also important to hear from survivors during this training. He would like to see training that includes hearing from a survivor of the abuse.

The Hope and Healing Committee continues to listen and learn from survivors of abuse, their family members, and other people who have been impacted by abuse in the Catholic Church. We are grateful for Mike's input and his willingness to have a deep discussion about these important topics.

Also include on the "Listening and Learning" webpage is a document produced by Mike listing the impacts of his abuse. We are humbled by the opportunity to publish and share these.

Mike has graciously reviewed this document and given his permission for it to be published and shared.