

# Alaina Kleinbeck: Christian accountability in a #MeToo world



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Members of the media industry have shared their stories and demanded an end to systems that perpetuate sexual assault and harassment. The church has secrets, too, and must change, writes the director of Duke Youth Academy.

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Now that the pace of the #MeToo movement has slowed from shocking daily revelations, the real work, the true reckoning, begins.

Before #MeToo went viral in fall 2017, with scores of women sharing stories of sexual assault and sexual harassment, I had found it hard to know what to do when I heard an off-color break room comment or felt objectified, overlooked or interrupted. I'd make mental notes of men who gave me the creeps and listen carefully when other women shared their experiences.

I would share my own experiences in hushed tones and with raised eyebrows, omitting names if it seemed professionally risky. When someone would say, “Oh, now that he’s married, he’s less creepy,” I’d nod. But internally, my suspicion would not relent.

This practice, I now understand, is a whisper network. [Monica Byrne rightly points out](#) that what some call gossip is often the exchange of sanity- and life-saving information. But whisper networks are imperfect. Those on the outside of a whisper network or who are new in town don’t get the information. And whisper networks provide only the bare minimum of protection, alerting us to avoid known predators and exploiters.

Moira Donegan [sought to overcome the limitations of the whisper network](#) when she developed the Media Men list, an anonymously crowd-sourced Google spreadsheet that allowed people to list men in the media industry who sexually abused, harassed or coerced others. The creation of the list sought to give women an alternative place to report harassment without fear of retaliation, judgment or reproach. Women were able to exchange important information outside the rules and laws that govern HR offices and law enforcement. The list was live for only a few hours before its viral existence surpassed Donegan’s capacity to manage it.

In many ways, the Media Men list was simply a rumor mill. That is partly the point. It pressured people to pay attention. It democratized the availability of information. It is an imperfect answer to the imperfect design of institutional accountability structures. But it came to be because institutions fail to adequately protect women and men from harassment, abuse and coercion.

Two photojournalists, Daniel Sircar and Justin Cook, noticed the number of people in their field being named for sexual misconduct. They [wanted to change their industry for the better](#). They drafted a Google form, calling men (and others) to sign a letter asking industry organizations, conferences and workshops to publicly condemn harassment and discrimination, to share the steps they’re taking to ensure a safe working environment, and to ban people who make events and work unsafe.

This [open letter](#) brought to light a different whisper network: men who were fed up with toxic work cultures that diminished their female and other minority colleagues. Sircar and Cook didn’t want to

whisper their concern and support in hushed networks; they sought to organize their voices and work with their female colleagues to change the culture of the photojournalism industry.

The long-term effects of these two efforts on the media industry remain to be seen, but both are instructive to ways we think about accountability in the church.

We, too, have our open secrets. We, too, are well aware of the ways that the church has failed to protect people, particularly women and children, from abusive clergy. We have institutional structures whose imperfect systems of accountability presume not only innocence but also forgiveness before repentance and reparation. Our institutions, much like those in the media industry, are undergoing vast changes as they cope with fewer resources and rapidly shifting cultural conditions.

We exist in a world that needs a Ministry Men list as much as it needs a Media Men list to awaken us to the close proximity and vastness of sexual abuse, harassment, coercion and other oppressive behaviors in ministry. I regularly hear stories of men and women in ministry who have treated others dismissively or abusively. Our work cultures in the church have failed to foster the full accountability we need for every person to thrive.

We, too, need innovation in the accountability structures we use to protect women, children, people of color, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities and others who experience marginalization. We, too, need to liberate the information whispered in the break room or the bar across town from our churches and offices. We, too, need men who are fed up with the toxic ministry culture to unveil their whisper network and demand accountability in ways that our institutions cannot or will not.

Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus called religious authorities to see women, children, the ill, the oppressed with new eyes. The apostle Paul called early churches to be places of welcome for the disenfranchised. This was a wholly new vision of community, and a radical call to responsibility toward others. This is the Christian call, whether in first-century Palestine or 21st-century America.

May we, too, speak up and make change.