

3rd June, 2024.

To Whom It May Concern:

I am Jaime Simpson, an accredited counsellor (level 4) with the Australian Counselling Association, I also am the unit coordinator for [REDACTED]. I am also currently researching adult clergy sexual abuse in Evangelical churches in Australia for my Master of Philosophy.

I am submitting this letter to support the #YourReferenceAintRelevantCampaign. I want to see systemic change in our legal system that will prioritise hearing the voices of victim-survivors of abuse and remove barriers that prevent victims in coming forward to seek justice. The use of character references is one such barrier used to silence victims.

Abolishing the use of character references in the court system is an important step towards creating a more just and equitable legal system.

Research shows that 92% of sexual assault cases don't get reported to the police. Looking at the latest BOSCAR report, it is horrifying, why would anyone want to report their victimisation to the police. 85% of sexual assaults reported to the police in NSW did not even make it to the court room. Of the 15% of cases that did make it to the court room less than half resulted in a guilty verdict. I am horrified that only 7% of reported sexual assaults in NSW result in a guilty verdict.

I am left wondering, how many of the 92% of cases that did not make it to the court or did not result in a guilty verdict were because the alleged perpetrator was able to use their social status, their career choice, their influence, or their 'good' character to deny, minimise, or escape accountability?

Perpetrators of grooming and abuse are master manipulators. They are skilled at surrounding themselves with people who they have only presented one side of themselves to. In everyday life they may project an image of being a 'good' father, a 'good' husband or wife, a 'good' community member, a 'good' faith leader, a 'good' sports coach, or a 'good' teacher.

However, this is in fact an image that they have purposefully created to gain allies, to gain trust and to project an image that they need to project so that one day they can call on those people around them for a 'good' character reference.

These are tactics of abuse, and they are purposeful and insidious because they manipulate everyone around them to make them believe that they are 'good' - so when the day comes that someone finds the courage to speak up and share their story of harm, the perpetrator can use those around him to say he is of 'good' character. When in fact, he is not. He has created this image on purpose for such a time as this, when he needs to call on people so he can deny, attack the victim's credibility, and reverse the victim and offender (DARVO, a very well-known concept used by perpetrators of abuse developed by Jennifer Freyd).

No amount of good a sexual predator does in the community negates the harms that they have caused for the victim and their families.

I was horrified reading that [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] were able to use legal loopholes that used their gender to negate the sexual harm they caused children, a form of 'character references' based on gender. Retrospective laws like these should be nullified by the significant trauma that has resulted for the victim survivor. All victims of abuse should receive a fair and just trial despite the gender or the perceived character of the alleged perpetrator. Despite how many years are passed. There should be opportunities for all victim survivor's if they choose to seek justice through a Court that they will be heard, and their voice is heard over the voices of those who were not harmed by their perpetrator.

When we know better, we should do better. In 2024, we know better, but our legal system is not 'doing better'.

I know the impact that character references have on people's lives. I've seen it professionally, and I have lived this personally. I am now a 47-year-old woman, yet, as an older teenager, the sexual harm and the chaos and confusion that resulted for me, by someone assumed to be of 'good' character is still incredibly traumatic to relive today.

At 14 years old, I joined an Evangelical faith community, assuming the leaders were of 'good character'.

At 15 years old, I completed work experience in this faith community, assuming the Pastor was of 'good character'.

On the cusp of adulthood, just after leaving high school, I volunteered to do some administration work within my faith community. I met my Pastor alone, trusting he was of 'good character'. He was 14 years older than me, married with three children. I had no reason but to assume he was of 'good character'.

When he groomed and sexually exploited me on the office floor, I still assumed as my Pastor, he was of 'good character', and instead of placing the blame where it belonged, I believed that something was so desperately wrong with me, and I somehow caused my Pastor to 'fall into sin'. That I was the one with a 'bad character'.

When my parents found love letters written to their teenage daughter, shocked with the contents of them, they took them to the Pastor of the church, assuming he was of 'good character' and would help them find who wrote them to her. Not knowing it was him who wrote them.

When my parents didn't get the answer that they were looking for, they contacted [REDACTED]. They did an 'investigation' (I use that word loosely), they automatically assumed the Pastor was of 'good character' and named me an *'obsessed teenager who copied my pastor's handwriting and wrote my own love letters'*. When challenged about this outcome from one of the church leaders, they stated, "*we are standing by our man*". He was assumed to have had a 'good character'.

28 years on when I had the language and courage to report the 'Pastor' to [REDACTED], they still assumed he was of 'good character'. When he gave a 'categorical denial' to my allegations, without question, they automatically closed my case. My voice was not heard, it was not enough. Yet, the Pastor's categorical denial was enough because they believed he was of 'good character'.

I am no longer a teenage girl, and I contested this categorical denial, knowing the pastor was not of 'good character'.

However, to do this, my voice was not believed, it was not enough over those who believed he was of 'good character' because of his position as a pastor.

I had to be willing to be vulnerable and go back 25 years and ask people from that time to write statements from what they recalled happen in that small coastal town. It was only then we showed the true extent of how this pastor was NOT of 'good character'. He was then and is still now full of deceit, lies and cover ups. He caused much spiritual harm to many within that small community. He is not of good character.

Near 30 years on, the current investigation concluded "based on the balance of probabilities" my allegations were substantiated. However, the 'Pastor' was given the chance to resign his credentials as a minister, whilst he "strenuously denies" my allegations. Resigning his credentials means there has been no sanctions, no announcements with the faith community and he is still actively planting churches around the world today with the support around him from those who assume he is of 'good character'.

My case did not even hit the court rooms. There are still no laws in Australia to protect a congregation member at the age of 18 from being sexually groomed and exploited by their pastor. There is also zero government regulation in the evangelical space, there is no place for someone to report the harms caused by these religious leaders if they are not part of a governing body. And, even when they are part of a governing body, the governing body tends to *stand by their man* because they assume he is of 'good character. If they are found to have been involved in 'misconduct', they are placed on a restoration path with a short suspension of their credentials because they assume they simply had a lapse in moral judgement.

I am hoping the new consent laws provide some form of legal option for those above the age of 18 who are groomed by someone in a position of power such as a pastor, a doctor, a psychologist, or educator, because the law cannot persuade where it cannot punish.

I guarantee if my case ended up in court, the 'good' character references would be coming from all the pastor's globally who still platform this man today. Because they have not seen the man that I know, the one who groomed, deceived, and sexually exploited me. The one who placed all the blame back on me as a teenager and then continued to sexually harass me for years. He was not and is still not of 'good character'.

This man and his wife, live their lifestyle off the generosity of people's tithes and offerings who still believe he is of 'good character'. He is seen as an 'upstanding' citizen and doing 'good' in the world as he works in third world nations. Yet, he continues to deny touching my teenage body. He is not of 'good character'.

One of the reasons it took me so long to report this pastor was because I knew he would find an army of people around him to support him and continue the narrative that he is of 'good character' and that I am the one with a 'bad character'. There is a belief in religious communities that when a survivor comes forward with any form of sexual misconduct allegations towards a member of clergy, that they want to destroy the church, or they are after compensation. Many of us harmed in faith communities stay quiet for this reason. We know that we will be attacked.

Character references are highly subjective based on what image the alleged perpetrator has projected to those he will need to stand by him one day to escape accountability. The power imbalance between the Pastor who caused me harm and myself was substantial, not only the spiritual power imbalance, but the age gap and life experience and networks were so significant that my voice did not matter. This is true in so many cases that we see daily in the media.

Inequality, power, and privilege is often at the centre of character references and are being exploited from those who have the most social capital. We saw this very clearly when George Pell used former Prime Minister John Howard to state he was of 'good character'. No one who abuses a child, or cover ups abuse of a child is of 'good character'.

Being told I was an *obsessed teenager who copied my pastors handwriting and wrote my own love letters* silenced me. My voice was never heard. My experience was never acknowledged. No one provided the language that I needed to understand what happened to me. And when I finally had the language and reported to the governing body, they breached my confidentiality and my privacy. When the investigation went ahead, they refused to suspend the pastor's credentials during the investigation, allowing him to preach around the world raising money for his organisation. This is all because they assumed he was of 'good character' and that I was not.

This not only happens in faith communities. I see this daily in the Family Domestic Violence space, the victim's experience is undermined by those around the alleged perpetrator who provide glowing references. Yet, these people only know the one side of the perpetrator.

If we want to see change in the trajectory of sexual violence in Australia, we need to flip the script. It is an unequal and unfair system that places the alleged perpetrator's good character in one area of their life, above the evil criminal actions that they commit in another area of their life. The significant amount of trauma that results for the victim-survivor hearing that their perpetrator is of good character is indescribable.

In my research with adult women sexually groomed and abused by Pastors in Evangelical settings, significant psychological injuries occurred. 48.15% of survivors had thoughts of suicide, 72% were diagnosed with anxiety, 52% post-traumatic stress disorder and 48% depression. Many of these survivors were betrayed by the institution that should have been in place to protect them. The pastors who caused these women harm, are automatically assumed to be of 'good character'; because of the career they have chosen. Yet, we need to flip the script and recognise that many of these pastors go into these careers because the church environment is a place that they can abuse their power and go undetected because people assume the pastor is of 'good character'.

I urge you to consider the harms that result to victim survivors of sexual abuse when character references are used to deny, excuse, justify, or minimise the victim-survivors experience. There are significant lifelong traumatic responses that results from being sexually groomed, sexually assaulted and or sexually abused; survivor's do not needed another layer of systems abuse by allowing the use of character references to nullify their experience of harm.

Kind regards

Jaime Simpson