

Abuse at home:

HOW WE CAN HELP BREAK THE CYCLE



Domestic and family violence is in the news like never before. Last year almost 30,000 reports of domestic violence were made to NSW Police. The Federal Government promised \$100 million worth of measures to protect victims around the country. As Christians, do we have a role to play? Last year, the PCNSW General Assembly for the first time produced an official statement on the topic - and voted to amend Breaking the Silence to include provisions for Domestic and Family Violence which can help us act. KAREN FORMAN takes a look at the Church response to an alarming, tragic subject.

It was around midnight on a winter's night in 2006 that Lucy* tentatively tapped at the front door of the manse attached to the church she and her husband had recently started attending with their young baby.

Shaking with cold and shock, with her sleeping baby son clutched to her chest in his bunny rug, she prayed that the minister she knew "only a little bit" might open up the door.

"I had been driving around town with the baby in the back seat for almost two hours; with no nappies, no money, no nothing; just a fear of going home," the now 42 year old professional says.

"After my husband had smashed the bathroom door down with the baby in the bath and me inside, then grabbed the baby out of my arms and threatened me - again - I just ran. I was so afraid for our safety that I didn't stop to grab even my purse. I just had to get away. I had no idea where I was going to go or what I was going to do. I was in shock and broken hearted that the man I loved could do this to me and his son."

As she had done so many times before, Lucy had called the telephone support service Lifeline on her mobile phone after leaving the house. Like so many times before, the counsellor on the phone told her she was a victim of domestic violence and needed to go somewhere safe.

But with no close family nearby and no knowledge of women's shelters in her area; along with a fear of going to the police "because it might end my marriage", she didn't know where "safe" was.

"The only safe place I could think of was church," she says. "So that's where I went."

Years later the now single mother, who has relied heavily on her faith in God and support from her church to put her life back together, says she never wanted to separate from her husband, whom she loved. She just wanted things to get better. She didn't want anyone to know about the abuse, or his pornography habit, or the affairs she knew he

was having. She was ashamed that she was being labelled a victim of domestic and family violence and blamed herself for not being good enough to please her husband.

"I thought that if I behaved differently, he might treat me better. I thought if I obeyed his every wish and command, he would stop abusing me. All I wanted was for it (the abuse) to stop. "I wanted my husband to change so we could be a happy family. I didn't want to go to the police and cause trouble or risk losing my marriage and I didn't want to have to fight for custody of my son, knowing the Family Court system operates from a premise of 50-50 care, which could have left my son at risk when he was with his Dad. I hoped and prayed that everything could be fixed."

But the abuse which had begun with emotional abuse (criticizing her, name calling, backstabbing her, denigrating her character in defence of her response to her husband's porn addiction) and had progressed to physical ("having the baby pulled off my breast as I was feeding him, being pulled out of bed by the hair in the middle of the night, being pushed, threatened and finally punched...the abuse which led to her knocking at her pastor's door in the middle of the night, would prove to be too much for her to handle alone. It didn't help that her husband, who had been on the management committee at church and attended church every Sunday and a study group once a week, regularly threw Bible verses at her, particularly Ephesians 5:22 "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body..."

God sent her to her pastor's house, where she was taken inside, given a warm bed by the minister and his wife, some help with her baby, some referrals to professional services and then many months of support - for both Lucy and her husband - as they tried to rebuild a marriage struck down by sin.

"I was blessed," she says. "John and Jan* had no hesitation in doing all they could to help us. Not just me; us. They referred us to the Presbyterian Counselling Service; they spent time with each of us; they explained

that living apart for a while so that my husband could work on his anger issues was not sinning in God's eyes, but giving our Christian marriage a chance. They worked with us physically, emotionally and Biblically. I felt supported."

Unfortunately Lucy's husband was unable to overcome his problems and the marriage ended when they learned her husband's behaviours stemmed from a dangerous addiction which put her son at great risk: child pornography. With police, DOCS and other authorities involved, she had no choice but to leave for the sake of her baby. "I felt lonely but God became my husband. I felt ashamed that I was divorced but my minister explained that because my husband had broken his marriage vows, that God would not judge me. I felt sad, but with the love and support of my church and a lot of counselling, I healed. I felt afraid in the Family Court system, but I prayed and God answered my prayers and now my case is being used as a precedent to save other children."

Fortunately for Lucy, her pastor and his wife had had some experience dealing with victims of domestic and family violence and were able to take action to help her and her son. At the time, the PCNSW had no guidelines for clergy on the issue but Lucy says the ministry couple came at it Biblically, totally Christ centred and using the Bible as a reference always.

Similarly, back then, there was no obligation to report domestic and family abuse, only child abuse, but because in Lucy's case there was a risk of child abuse, her minister did report the matter to the PCNSW Conduct Protocol Unit and took part in police investigations and court trials.

But that has now changed.

In July last year, the NSW General Assembly agreed that "The Bible is clear that God is opposed to abuse in marriage or in the family. The model of love in the Bible is Jesus' suffering for others, the very opposite of abuse. So any attempt to turn the Bible's teaching into an excuse for abuse is a terrible distortion of its message."

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But it didn't stop with a mere statement. The NSWGA also agreed to make recommended changes to *Breaking the Silence*, the church's procedure for dealing with and preventing abuse, which provided proactive guidelines on what to do in the case of domestic and family violence occurring in churches.

Why did the Church decide to make a stand after all this time?

Gospel, Society and Culture (G, S&C) convener John McClean says it began when discussions on the topic in the media included a claim that theologically conservative churches which taught that a wife should submit to her husband were at least complicit in allowing domestic violence. Mr McClean has since written on the topic (see breakaway).

“The Centre for Public Christianity called for an independent study into the issue and Fairfax media approached PCNSW for a comment,” he said. “The Moderator, after consulting with the General Manager, Communications Manager and the convener of G,S&C released a statement, which said: “The Bible is clear that God is opposed to abuse in marriage or in the family. He particularly warns husbands to be considerate to their wives and treat them with respect. The model of love in the Bible is Jesus' suffering for others, the very opposite of abuse. So any attempt to turn the Bible's teaching into an excuse for verbal, physical or sexual abuse is a terrible distortion of its message. [However, humans are prone to distort God's good ways into evil, and this can happen with the Bible's teaching on marriage]. If this is happening in churches, then churches and church leaders should be aware of it, and do all they can to protect victims. A carefully conducted independent study may assist in this process and we would support such a study.

“In the process of developing this statement, we realized that the Assembly had not made a statement about domestic and family violence and decided to work on creating one to clarify for members that the Bible's teaching on submission in marriage in no way endorsed violence or abuse; clarify for ministers, elders and others involved in pastoral care that domestic and family violence must not be ignored; provide an opportunity to include a section on domestic and family violence in *Breaking the Silence* and in the accompanying training; and create an official church position which could be quoted to the media if necessary.”

That statement, which was adopted by the General Assembly with no debate, says:

“Domestic and family violence can be defined as actions which involve violent, abusive or intimidating behaviour carried out by a partner, carer or family member to control, dominate or instil fear, including

physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, financial or other types of abuse.

God is opposed to abuse and violence in marriage and in the family. He particularly warns husbands to be considerate to their wives and treat them with respect (Eph 5:28–30; 1 Peter 3:7). The model of love in the Bible is Jesus' suffering for others, the very opposite of abuse.

Any attempt to use the Bible's teaching as a pretext for abuse is a distortion of its message. The Bible's teaching that a wife should submit to her husband is not a basis for a husband to force submission or to seek to control his wife or to dominate her or cause her to fear. Acts of domestic violence and abuse are heinous sins.

Humans are prone to distort God's good ways into evil, and this can happen with the Bible's teaching on marriage. If this is happening in churches, ministers and elders should actively teach against it as well as doing all they can to protect victims.

Ministers, elders and church leaders involved in pastoral care should be alert for signs of domestic and family violence and teaching in churches should address these issues.

Sessions should seek to identify to the congregation several people, including some women, whom members could approach for pastoral care and support if they are facing domestic and family violence.

When a minister, elder or church leader is aware of domestic and family violence within a church family they should follow the guidelines in Section 11 & 12 of *Breaking the Silence*. The Conduct Protocol Unit is able to be contacted for advice and support.

When a minister, elder or church leader is aware of domestic and family violence in which no child is involved and the alleged offender is not an office bearer or leader in a Presbyterian Church then he or she should follow the general guidelines of these sections of *BTS* and particularly:

- seek to contact the victim as soon as possible, if he or she has not raised a concern, to clarify the situation;
- listen carefully to that person;
- ask what can be done to make them feel safe and take steps to make them safe;
- encourage the person to report their concerns to the police and support them in doing so;
- contact the police directly if someone is in danger or they have knowledge which would assist authorities to apprehend or convict a person of a serious offence, or the incident involves either physical or sexual assault;
- with the permission of the person inform elders and other appropriate leaders within the church so they are able to provide appropriate care.

If the offender is a member of the church

then church discipline may be appropriate, recognising that church discipline aims for restoration and that restoration depends upon genuine repentance. Care should be taken when an active Police investigation has commenced to ensure that any church discipline proceedings do not interfere with Police matters. The Conduct Protocol Unit can provide advice in these circumstances.

No victim of domestic and family violence should be pressured to reconcile with or restore a relationship with an offender.

If a member of a church is aware of domestic and family violence in a church family they should take similar steps if they are able. They may inform the minister or an elder of the church, or they may go directly to the police. Any member of the church who is concerned about a possible case of domestic and family violence is able to contact the Conduct Protocol Unit for advice and support.”

The Assembly then adopted changes to *Breaking the Silence* as proposed by the Conduct Protocol Unit to clarify that the church was opposed to domestic and family violence and provide office-bearers and those involved in pastoral care with guidelines for responding to evidence of domestic and family violence.

Domestic and Family Violence is specifically covered in the 2015 Edition of *Breaking the Silence* which was distributed to all congregations in December and January.

This means that the church's Code of Conduct now includes a specific provision that states “With regard to adults and young people you will not condone or participate in domestic or family violence, which involves violent, abusive or intimidating behaviour carried out by a partner, carer or family member to control, dominate or instil fear. This includes physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, financial or other types of abuse.”

As part of the *Breaking the Silence* training all people in positions of authority within the church will now be informed of this provision and the fact that it applies to them, and they will be given information about how to respond should they become aware of a situation involving Domestic & Family Violence.

If you are aware of a situation or need help you can talk to your minister or an elder, or you can contact the Conduct Protocol Unit direct. The new Director of the CPU, Jon Flood, can provide information and guidance Ph: 02 9690 9325 or M: 0406 380 909. You are also welcome to call the Presbyterian Counselling Service on 1800 818 133 for advice and a referral to a Christian counsellor. And remember, if you or anyone you know is in danger you should contact your local police.

Lucy says she was blessed with the help she received. “I am glad these guidelines have come into being as I could see how ministers could do a lot to help people like me if they were more aware of how to,” she said. “I was also pleased to read John McClean's report on complementarianism, as that was one of the main things my ex-husband used against me.”

*names have been changed

WHAT IS DOMESTIC & FAMILY VIOLENCE?

Domestic and family violence is actions which involve violent, abusive or intimidating behaviour carried out by a spouse, carer or family member to control, dominate or instil fear, including physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, financial or other types of abuse. It is sometimes called relationship violence or intimate partner violence. Domestic violence where there are children in the household is child abuse.

Domestic and family violence is a pattern of behaviour, rather than a single incident. Like grooming, it gradually undermines the victim's ability to seek help and their confidence in themselves and others.

Domestic and family violence can happen in all sorts of relationships, including:

- intimate partners (husbands and wives)
- older people (sometimes called elder abuse)
- parents and children; and
- people with a disability and their carers.

DOMESTIC & FAMILY VIOLENCE: THE STATS

One in six Australian women has experienced violence from a current or former partner. One in three Australian women will experience violence in their lifetime. Sixty-three women have been killed in Australia this year.

A new experimental data set from the Australian Bureau of Statistics based on police data where incidents were recorded as being domestic or family violence related was released for the first time late last year.

The numbers show the number of victims of family and domestic violence-related assault reported to police.

- **NSW – 28,780 victims;**
- **South Australia – 5,691 victims;**
- **Western Australia – 14,603 victims;**
- **Northern Territory – 4,287 victims; and**
- **ACT – 615 victims.**

12,561 women were victims of assault in NSW last year. That's 34 a day. Of those, 9651 were assaults by a partner and another 2993 were ex-partners. 39-49 per cent of victims of family and domestic violence are aged between 20 and 34 years of age.

The police data reaffirms that women are overwhelmingly the victims of family and domestic violence. The ABS reports there are twice as many female victims (19,488) as male victims (9261) in NSW. Of those 9261 male victims of assault, only 3305 incidents involved a partner or an ex.

Another 4400 or so victims were victims of assault by "other family members."

DOMESTIC & FAMILY VIOLENCE: A CASE STUDY



This is the story of "Mighty Oaks" as in Isaiah 61:3. Obviously, that is not her real name but when you hear her story you will understand why. Mighty Oaks is in her 80's and has several children. She was subject to mental, physical and sexual abuse for 19 years in her first marriage and for five years in her second marriage. This is her story.

In my first marriage, my husband didn't hold himself responsible for anything. He kept all the housekeeping money for himself. He smoked 100 cigarettes a day. I used to have to hide the money for the kids' food or they would starve. When a child died it was shrugged off as "so what? It's just another child." At one point he rejected me completely. I had a couple of visits to the doctor and he put me on an anti anxiety drug and he looked at me and said, "He is killing you." The extent of the abuse meant that I had to constantly be aware of protecting my children from him. So after 19 years I left him – for my safety because the children had already left.

All through this time I attended my local church. I wasn't a believer at this stage and this particular congregation made me feel

that I was the problem in the marriage; that it was my fault. Because of the effects of the anti anxiety drug people judged me. People in the Church didn't understand what was happening to me and actually told me I shouldn't even be in church. So I didn't have any support from a church family. They didn't even try and understand the mental, physical and sexual abuse that I was experiencing.

It was at that stage that I said to God, "If you help me I will help you." Looking back I now know that that was a terrible thing to say, because I know that you come to God offering nothing than a broken life. But that is what I said to God then. I turned to God at that stage because I was by myself.

After a time I got married again. I quickly found myself trapped. Every move I made was watched and I was physically abused and raped. Also I knew that my husband was unfaithful to me at this time and had no concern for my wellbeing. This caused me to slip into a deep depression.

Again the church didn't see me as the victim in this situation and saw that I was the one who had to change. They directed me to a psychologist to get "fixed up." However the reverse happened. The psycholo-

gist listened to my story and advised me to immediately "get out of the situation" which I did.

When asked "Why are you still at Church?" Mighty Oaks said, "God is the same today, tomorrow and yesterday. Even though my bargain with God was naive when I became a Christian, I have since discovered in his word that He isn't one who demands, but he wants to take care of me and accepts me completely not because of what I can do for him, but because of what he has done for me in Jesus ... I thought because of my experience with men that he was an angry God who wanted to dominate me. But I read in the Bible that he is kind and loving and he will lead me to a place where I am safe in his hands. He is the saviour of my soul, the sanity of my life; I could not dream of living any other way."

"I couldn't trust anybody, I couldn't talk to men or women, because of the fear deep down inside. I just couldn't trust people. I couldn't even trust myself because I felt totally inadequate. But God is totally trust worthy.

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He says to me in Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope” and John 14:1-3 “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”

When asked how she is doing these days Mighty Oaks responded, “I love sitting at the computer and reading devotional material. Because physically I can’t hold a book any more. I feel great. I know that God has forgiven me the greater offense and I can rest in his grace. He has given me a forgiving spirit where once there was a spirit of fear.”

We also asked Mighty Oaks what she thought of the Church’s position on domestic and family abuse and also the new Breaking the Silence policy, and what she thought could be

done to help women like her in churches. She said, “It’s great if churches put these things into practice and they are not just words on a page. That the leadership in the church be better trained and show Christ’s compassion because that is not what I experienced. Many times the church leadership look at people in the congregation and don’t really understand the deep hurts in people’s lives and sometimes attach blame where it shouldn’t be attached. What I really needed from people in church was for someone to come up to me and ask me, “Can I help?” Because it was obvious I was in distress.”



WHERE TO GO FOR HELP/REFERRAL

If you need immediate help in a violent situation please call the Police on 000

Other places you can find help include:

NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT HELPLINE (24 HOURS):

1800 737 732 or 1800 Respect

LIFELINE:

131 114

KIDS HELPLINE:

1800 551 800

CHILD PROTECTION HELPLINE:

132111

PRESBYTERIAN COUNSELLING SERVICE (JERICHO ROAD)

Ph: 1800 818 133

Coordinator: Justine Jenner
www.jerichoroad.org.au

The purpose of the Presbyterian Counselling Service is to provide quality care and support to individuals and families within or connected to the Presbyterian Church who are in need of professional counselling or similar services.

It aims to facilitate a process where both professional counselling and pastoral care can come together to provide healing and reconciliation for the hurt and distressed. Through referrals and financial subsidies, PCS removes the two main barriers many people face when in need of counselling. PCS provides high quality and distinctively Christian counselling to all those in the Presbyterian community who are most vulnerable and who would otherwise be isolated from support.

DOES COMPLEMENTARIANISM PROMOTE DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE?

An excerpt from Rev John McClean’s writing on complementarianism and domestic and family violence in the book based on the conference The Gender Conservation

The most troubling aspect of complementarianism for me is the accusation that it allows or promotes domestic violence. Julia Baird raised this concern in a series of articles in The Sydney Morning Herald this year.

Domestic violence and abuse and violence against women seem to be increasing in Australia, though accurate statistics are not available. Certainly many women are effected by such violence and abuse.

Some of the literature on domestic violence from the 1970s asserted or assumed a direct connection between patriarchy and abuse of women.

Recent Australian reports have continued this theme, noting a correlation between violence against women and views of gender roles.

Yet the picture is more complicated, since more recent research has identified several other likely causes and some significant analyses of the data suggest that adult male abusers “could not be differentiated from non-abusive men on the sole basis of traditional (patriarchal) gender attitudes”.

When regular church attendance is added to a patriarchal view, the picture changes further since “there is an inverse relationship between church attendance and domestic violence”

Some studies suggest “conservative Protestant men who attend church regularly are ... the least likely group to engage in domestic violence”. Christian community with models of loving, non-dominating masculinity and improved confidence from this community all serve to reduce abusive behaviour.

Nevertheless, as Tracy suggests, patriarchal thinking is risk factor for abuse. Complementarians must not simply protest the accusation, they must protect women in churches. This brings the ‘praxis’ dimension of contextualisation most clearly into focus. The experience of women in complementarian churches must be taken seriously and complementarians have to take responsibility for the kind of church and family culture they are promoting.

It must be made patently clear that a Christian doctrine of headship is no pretext for abuse. There is no basis for a husband to force submission or to seek to control his wife or to dominate her or cause her to fear. It must be very clear that God is opposed to abuse and violence in marriage and in the family. He particularly warns husbands to be considerate to their wives and treat them with respect (Ephesians 5:28–30; 1 Peter 3:7). The model of love in the Bible, Jesus’ suffering for others, is the very opposite of abuse.

Complementarian churches should recognise that all-male leadership can make it difficult for women facing abuse to find help and protection from the church. There is a tendency to protect men (especially church leaders) from accusations. So, churches must ensure that women who face abuse are confident they will be supported, identifying women to whom they can turn to report abuse and find help.

Approaches to complementarianism which do not view marriage as primarily a relationship of headship and submission go some way to ameliorate the risk of abuse.