

# The church facing its shame over domestic violence in its midst: a pastoral counsellor's response

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As a new relationship counsellor with a church-based counselling agency in the early 1990s, I was sent for training for dealing with the issue of domestic violence. Many of the agency's clients were church members; some were clergy families. Early on during the training, the trainer made a statement that I found somewhat startling for someone who had had little experience of domestic violence in my own family. He said that when he was working with a couple who had come for counselling, he always assumed that domestic violence was present unless demonstrated otherwise. Internally I railed against this assertion, naïvely believing that in the "nice" population of Christian clients I would be seeing at the agency, domestic violence would be present very occasionally, but that it was not something I should be routinely expecting.

At about this time in Melbourne, Project Anna<sup>1</sup> was established, a collaboration between representatives of Catholic, Anglican, Churches of Christ, Uniting Church, and the Salvation Army churches, to gather the stories of the women from churches who had experienced violence. This project aimed to hear the voices and lived experiences of the women who

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had experienced “violence in their own homes, in their own congregations and in their own churches”.<sup>2</sup> A summary report outlines how “reports from other sexual assault centres and family violence services which assist victims also confirm to us, on a daily basis, that the church community is far from being a place of justice and love for all. Rather, the church too often is experienced as a haven for the perpetrators of criminal activity and a hell for the victims of those assaults”.<sup>3</sup> Delving deeper into the results of this project, it is alarming to realise that nearly thirty years ago the same stories were being told by women who had experienced violence from their Christian husbands, as were reported in the ABC report of domestic violence in the church in 2017.<sup>4</sup>

This disturbing fact of there being little apparent change in the experiences of women regarding violence in church over a thirty-year period is the impetus behind this paper. Recent events in the Australian media, including the ABC series of programs on the issue of domestic violence in the church<sup>5</sup> and the explosion of “#metoo”, have highlighted the issue of the abuse of women both in and out of the church. Given this information is not new, what has prevented the church community from addressing a matter of grave and at times life-threatening importance? This paper will explore how the issue of shame may have caused the church as a whole, church leadership, and church members, to largely ignore the matter of domestic violence within the church, and what methods might be employed to end this silencing by shame to ensure that the church can tackle this problem head on.

Abuse of women by an intimate partner or spouse has many definitions, but for this paper the brief definition outlined in the recently adopted draft policy on domestic abuse of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney<sup>6</sup> has the benefit of brevity and clarity: “Domestic abuse includes (but is not limited to) emotional, verbal, social, economic, psychological, spiritual, physical and sexual abuse. Such behaviour often seeks to control, humiliate, dominate and/or instill fear in the victim.” Additionally, this policy notes the precepts included in the national code of conduct for Anglican clergy and church workers, *Faithfulness in Service*,<sup>7</sup> that “abuse of power is at the heart of many relationship problems in the Church and the community. In essence, abuse is one person’s misuse of power over another. Sometimes abuse will be a one-off event and at other times it will be a pattern of behaviour.” This paper will refer to persons who have experienced domestic violence as females, in keeping with much of the literature in this area, since the majority of

persons who have experienced domestic violence are female. However, this does not infer that males are not subject to domestic violence on occasions.

### **A brief history of domestic violence in Christian settings**

Violence against women is not new: within the pages of Scripture we read the stories of Bathsheba and Tamar—women who were both assaulted by powerful men who were seen as godly leaders. Nason-Clark outlines the passage of violence against women from Roman times when the law gave husbands the right to beat or kill their wives, through to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the law of assault permitted beating of women with a stick “no thicker than a thumb”, so long as no marks were left.<sup>8</sup> Discussion of family violence against women was not in the public domain before the 1970s, but it began emerging at this time largely in response to second wave feminism which enabled women through consciousness-raising groups to share their experiences.<sup>9</sup> The term “domestic violence” was first enshrined in Australian law in the *Family Law Act 1975*, as “violent, threatening or other behaviour by a person that coerces or controls a member of the person’s family, or causes the family member to be fearful.” The first women’s refuge, Elsie’s Refuge, was opened in Sydney in 1974 by the women’s movement of the time, which was seeking to respond to the issue of women being abused by their husbands.<sup>10</sup> These women were unable to get legal help since domestic violence was usually considered a “private matter” and women leaving violent relationships were unable to get emergency housing.

Since these early days of feminist interventions, there has been a strong and growing legal recognition of the problems, and government-funded interventions to assist women leaving violent relationships. Early this century, there was a resurgence of focus on the problems of domestic violence, led by workers in the field bringing attention to the number of women being killed by their partners, and given additional prominence by Australian of the Year, Rosie Battie, in 2015.

Hence it can be seen that within secular society there has been steady, incremental response to the matter of violence against women, with associated legislative, societal, and government responses.

## **History of the church's knowledge of and response to domestic violence**

There have been sections of the church that have paid attention to the question of domestic violence, starting with Project Anna in the late eighties. Generally, however, the Australian church has been absent from the narrative of responding to the issue, in any concerted way, until recently.

Limited research into church members' experiences with domestic violence began with Project Anna, gathering stories of women in churches who had experienced domestic violence and reported "women suffering physical and emotional abuse in silence: 9 per cent had been abused by clergymen. More than half had experienced sexual violence—at 58 per cent, significantly higher than any other form of abuse."<sup>11</sup>

A conference report given to the UK Methodist church in 2002 demonstrated that from the 557 responses out of 1000 surveys distributed to church members, 17 per cent of respondents had experienced domestic violence. Of these, 13 per cent had experienced domestic violence several times, 54 per cent had experienced domestic violence for five years or more, 21 per cent for ten years or more: the main perpetrators of domestic violence were husbands and partners.<sup>12</sup> One of the conclusions of this report stated "the need for the for the Church to develop a policy on Domestic Violence and to evolve effective strategies for assisting ministers, lay workers and congregations in helping those who come to the Church for support."<sup>13</sup>

The "How's the Family?" report from the Evangelical Alliance in 2012 surveyed over 1,200 evangelical Christians in the UK using an opportunity sample.<sup>14</sup> This showed that nearly 10 per cent of respondents had experienced physical violence or abuse at least once in their relationship. This prevalence is not inconsistent with recent figures on physical violence experienced in relationships amongst Australian women and men: 17 per cent of all women, and 6 per cent of men.<sup>15</sup>

Further research in the UK was conducted in 2013 by the UK domestic violence charity "Restored", where 443 church members were interviewed by phone.<sup>16</sup> The results showed 19 per cent of adults not having their "no" accepted by a partner asking for sex, and 28 per cent experiencing their partner "sometimes or frequently" using emotionally manipulative tactics to get their own way. Nearly one third reported that their spouse or partner emotionally abused them by "being told that they were too fat, too thin,

ugly or stupid, or being isolated from friends, family or work colleagues by their partner.”

This evidence of domestic violence occurring in Christian families is replicated in a US study in 2006. From a sample of 1431, Drumm et al demonstrated in a carefully designed study that controlled for numerous variables including level of education, marital status, and childhood influences, that “females were at greater risk of common couple violence” against a background rate of common couple violence of 46 per cent.<sup>17</sup> The authors noted that listed behaviours, which could hardly be considered to be “Christian” behaviours, such as swearing, destroying treasured property, threatening to hit or actual hitting, name calling, etc, were recorded as being “pervasive”.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the limitations of research design in some of these studies, there is a common theme that demonstrates the existence of domestic violence in the Christian community at least at rates approaching what is seen in the general population: in evidence that has been available since the late 1980s.

### **The church’s response to persons who experience domestic violence**

Beginning with the Project Anna study, it can be seen there are a number of responses to women reporting domestic violence to their minister or pastor in the church community: not all of these are helpful responses. The Project Anna report described how women frequently would not involve those in authority within the church for fear of the response: others reported how when they did report, they were given inadequate responses such as being told to “accept God’s will”, “suffer gladly”, “keep praying for healing,” or “be more faithful and the violence will stop.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite this, women still turn to the church for help with the problem of domestic violence. Nason-Clark details that 60 percent of persons who experience domestic violence will turn to their pastor for assistance.<sup>20</sup> She contests the witness of some persons who experience domestic violence as to the types of inadequate responses quoted above, but rather suggests that clergy display a form of “excessive optimism”, expecting that the man is willing and able to stop the violence easily, and that a harmonious family life can be restored.<sup>21</sup>

Recent testimonies from Australian women do not support this benevolent view of clergy responses and give accounts of persons who experience domestic violence being shunned, ignored, encouraged to stay

in the abusive relationship, insisting that the victim “give him more chances”, or, to a woman whose husband would put his hands around her throat in a rage, “No marriage is perfect, you must try harder to support him and boost his self-worth.”<sup>22</sup>

## **What has prevented the church from responding to the issue of domestic violence?**

Available evidence suggests that there are a number of factors contributing to the unsatisfactory response of clergy to persons who experience domestic violence. Nason-Clark reports that only 8 per cent of evangelical clergy surveyed felt “well equipped” to deal with domestic violence matters.<sup>23</sup> Given the difficulties with, and paucity of, structured programs teaching about domestic violence in seminaries preparing people for the ministry,<sup>24</sup> this is an unsurprising result. Yet it would seem that clergy are overly optimistic about the adequacy of their response in contrast to victims’ anecdotal reports: 98 per cent of clergy in a recent US study believe that their church would offer a “safe haven” to persons who experience domestic violence.<sup>25</sup>

However, it is the contention of this writer that part of the failure of the church to respond effectively and lovingly has been contributed to by a comprehensive experience of shame that has caused silencing of persons who experience domestic violence, and an inability of leaders and church members to come to terms with the existence of a phenomenon within its membership that contests the Christian values of love, respect, and non-violence—values that are supposed to characterise Christian communities.

## **What is shame?**

Shame is a feeling that relates to our core sense of identity, whereby we feel ourselves judged by ourselves or others; it is not simply related to an improper act that we have committed, but it rather leads to a sense of being bad, having an internal sense of condemnation. Lewis describes this all-encompassing feeling thus:

Shame can be defined simply as the feeling we have when we evaluate our actions, feelings or behaviour, and conclude that we have done wrong. It encompasses the whole of ourselves, it generates a wish to hide, to disappear, or even to die.<sup>26</sup>

It is the personal experience of our innate unworthiness that distinguishes shame from guilt: in guilt the experience relates to the things we have done and it does not usually carry the overwhelming feeling of disgrace that is characteristic of shame. Helen Block Lewis differentiates the two experiences thus:

The experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the thing done or undone is the focus.<sup>27</sup>

Hence shame is a self-conscious emotion that relates to our experience of self as we evaluate ourselves and find our sense of self wanting. This sense of impropriety is usually related to events that violate our own or another's moral standards, whereby shame acts as a moral emotion.

This essential self-conscious aspect of shame can only emerge when the person has matured sufficiently to have developed an objective self-awareness.<sup>28</sup> That is, not only do they know themselves to be separate from the other, but they also know of the rules and standards by which they will be measured or judged.<sup>29</sup>

The tendency of shame to be evoked in the face of being measured is an important factor for those experiencing domestic violence in church communities, where standards of moral behaviour are clearly outlined and insisted upon through regular exhortations in preaching and personal devotional activities. For a Christian person suffering domestic violence in their marriage, they will be all too well-aware of the unacceptability of this situation, and the shame they feel will foster the hiding of their suffering.

Another characteristic of shame is that the emotion is usually hidden and not easily shared due to the intense discomfort that accompanies it. Shame is also considered to be a master emotion because of its ubiquity,<sup>30</sup> and the major effects on the sense of self and ability to relate to others that it produces. These two distinctives of shame as an emotion that is both hidden and drives the person experiencing shame to hide, leads the individual experiencing shame to a place of isolation where they have no ability to review and process the emotion.

A final reactive feature of the shame experience is the propensity to anger in certain individuals.<sup>31</sup> By blaming others, the person deflects the blame from self, thus reducing the painful experience of shame.

These aspects of shame (complete unworthiness, hiding consequences, anger and blame) are seen in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. Lewis describes shame as a the “focal emotion” in the creation story, whereby Adam and Eve disobey God, then have knowledge of their nakedness after eating fruit of the tree, and then demonstrate hiding and other blaming behaviours in response to their shame.<sup>32</sup>

## **Collective shame**

The interactive, interpersonal nature of shame lends it to having an influence on group dynamics and experiences. Recent research has explored the phenomenon of “group based shame,” which is an emotional response to the actions of fellow group members: actions which are outside the group norms or are, in themselves, judged to be immoral actions. The shame experienced by the member of the group is felt as a “tarnishing of their reputation,” not only of their individual worth, but also the worth and reputation of the group to which they belong.<sup>33</sup> Thus, parents can feel shamed by their children’s wrong behaviours or a person may feel that their personal and their country’s reputation are harmed by the failure of famous persons or sporting teams. Hence this writer posits that members of Christian churches who have found it hard to reconcile reports of domestic violence behaviour with members of their church or congregations, feel some momentary sense of shame and then distance themselves from that unpleasant feeling by moving into minimisation or denial.

## **Effects of shame on the individual and the group**

Shame has powerful effects on both individuals and any group that perceives that its norms have been challenged by behaviour of members of the group.

First, the experience of shame has a significant meaning in relation to self-worth: self-worth and efficacy are harmed in response to the shame experience, thus reducing the individual’s and group’s capacity to take appropriate steps towards healing and reparation. Accompanying the decrease in self-worth is the hiding propensity that prevents the matter in hand from being brought out into the open, again lessening the opportunity for repair.

Second, a hiding or avoidance strategy is adopted in response to the feeling of shame; as a result the shamed person becomes isolated and finds it harder to seek help and support.



For some, a third response is one of anger, whereby instead of experiencing the shame as an attack on self, they adopt an outward-focused angry and other-blaming reaction, effectively moving the attention from where the original “injury” occurred, again lessening the likelihood of restoration.

For most persons who experience domestic violence, being shamed through the various types of abuse meted out on them is a typical experience. From one of the women whose story was reported by the ABC:

Nobody else knew what was happening—they saw my then husband as a bright, bubbly, kind and helpful person. Driving to church he could be yelling at me or the kids, but as soon as he stepped out of the car, he would be charming, pleasant and happy, talking to people he met on the way in to church. As everything was always my fault, I tried to appease him; I tried to change for him . . . and although I knew my marriage was “sick,” I blamed myself . . . I saw it as my responsibility to make things better.<sup>34</sup>

Another experienced being shamed by a church member when she tried to reach out for help:

[My husband] was exceedingly popular and charismatic; publicly he had the appearance of a mild-mannered, kind-hearted servant of the Church. But at home he turned out to be a different person: volatile, controlling and violent in many ways . . . When I told [my church] of my ex-husband’s behaviour they did not respond—I assumed they didn’t believe me. My only other contact was a woman who rang me late one night, telling me vehemently that I should be ashamed of myself.<sup>35</sup>

One more states how difficult it was to even raise the matter with her minister, and when she did, she was ignored:

I’ve pleaded with them on many occasions to speak to my husband, too embarrassed to disclose the truth of his behaviour, insisting that his “depression” was shattering our family life. But the ministers have never made any effort to

get involved. I am ashamed and humiliated that I allowed this man to treat me as he did for so long.<sup>36</sup>

## **Facing shame: an integrating experience**

If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive.<sup>37</sup>

In her popular book, *Daring Greatly*, based on her grounded theory research into shame, Brown highlights the essential elements of dealing with shame: first, allowing ourselves to become aware of our shame, painful though that may be. Second, being willing to be open about what has shamed us and our experience of shame with another. The final aspect of this solution to shame is the response of the other: unlike some of the responses reported above, the listener needs to respond with "empathy and understanding".

This open and accepting manner differs from other less integrative reactions, where shame is escaped from by defensive means, including attacking self or others, awaiting dissipation of the shame, joining an ameliorating group, or through use of humour.<sup>38</sup> By recognising, embracing, and sharing with an empathic and responsive other, the shamed person (or group member) is reversing the initial assault of the shame attack where they felt rejected and isolated. Persons who experience domestic violence attest in their testimonies of recovery to the power of the accepting, listening other in the form of counsellor, church member, or minister.<sup>39</sup>

Brown's remedy aligns with the preferred treatment model supported by shame researcher, Tangney: the processes of relational validation, accessing and acknowledging shame, shame regulation, and transformation of shame.<sup>40</sup> The transformational process with shame that can occur after recognition and regulation involves a cognitive transformation into a guilt understanding of the situation, thus allowing for an effective reparative response to be made, if necessary.<sup>41</sup>

Hence, it is this process of facing and embracing shame that can allow the pro-social effects of shame to be realised, where "shame may promote proactive attempts to repair the tarnished image of one's group."<sup>42</sup>

However, Pattison is unenthusiastic about any particular therapeutic response to chronic shame,<sup>43</sup> adding that there has been a failure to address shame in any depth in pastoral theology. He argues that the church has been

unable to develop a pastoral theology of shame, partly as a defence against those who critique shame-producing qualities of Christianity, thus defending themselves against the shame produced by this critique. Citing the inability of many pastoral theologians to come to grips with the insights of those who have written about their sense of unrelenting shame, such as Simone Weil and Nietzsche,<sup>44</sup> Pattison confronts those who are unable to face “the fact that not all those who turn to Christ are healed.” Pattison’s remedy for the church is the call for all to become more aware of their own personal experience of shame, as difficult as this may be, so that “the cycle of shaming and abusive relationships can be questioned and halted.”<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, recent responses from various churches involving public apologies and commitments to raising awareness of the existence of domestic violence in church communities can be seen as an example of how being willing to face the shame of this scourge has not simply sought to restore the tarnished image of the group, but has stimulated a restorative and reparative reaction in churches. Notably many of these public apologies have included reference to shame:

However, we also confess with deep shame that domestic abuse has occurred among those who attend our churches, and even among some in leadership.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, these apologies have included firm commitment to action which is preventative for persons who experience domestic violence experiencing shame:

to ensure they have policies and good-practice guidelines in place, along with education and training, for responding well to situations involving intimate partner violence within our parishes and organisations.<sup>47</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Violence against women is a longstanding blight on the way humans relate to each other; that it happens in church communities is even more disturbing since it goes against basic Christian values of loving and respecting one another. Somewhat more unsettling is the realisation of how slow the church as an institution has been in acting vigorously to deal with the problem.

Instead, this paper demonstrates that despite research in the community and the church domain about the prevalence and dynamics of domestic violence, attitudes amongst church members and clergy have been uninformed and unhelpful, and, at times, actively shaming for the persons who experience domestic violence. The contribution of shame to this failure to respond has been examined, highlighting the aspects of the experience of shame that influence both the ability of persons who experience domestic violence to come forward and talk of their experiences, and the ways in which group shame may have operated to add to this silencing.

A brief consideration of the antidotes to shame point the way forward to a restorative and reparative response to the shame of domestic violence, both for those who experience domestic violence, but, more importantly, for the institution of the church as it comes to a full realisation and acknowledgement of its part in adding to the pain of the situation for those who experience domestic violence.

A church facing its shame and committing to an active process in regards to combatting domestic violence is only the beginning of a development that will need careful and dedicated attention to ensure that proper transformative policy and training procedures are put in place to guard against a continuation of violence against women and children in the home. (See the final endnote for more information on current information and training resources on domestic violence).<sup>48</sup>

## Endnotes

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