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Christianity and the Experience of Domestic Violence: What Does Faith Have to Do with It?

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Many religious men, women, teens and children look to their faith community for guidance and practical assistance in the aftermath of domestic violence. Looking at the interface between religion and abuse from a variety of perspectives, this article explores several unique features of the journey towards justice, safety, healing and wholeness for a religious victim, or perpetrator, of domestic violence. Whether someone is helped first by their congregation or a community-based agency, those who respond need to understand both the issue of domestic violence and the nature of religious faith. Building bridges between the steeple and the shelter—or congregations and their communities—is central to responding compassionately and with best practices, to domestic violence.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS A PERVERSIVE REALITY THAT KNOWS NO boundaries of class, color, county, or faith perspective (Stirling, Cameron, Nason-Clark, & Miedema 2004; Timmins, 1995). Its prevalence around the world has been documented through statistics collected by government agencies, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations Secretariat (Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2001/2010). Yet, religious voices are often silenced, or sidelined, and a holy hush still operates in many congregational or denominational circles (Nason-Clark, 2004; Fortune, 1991; Potter, 2007).

From the earliest days of the battered women's movement, there was a reluctance to see any perspective informed by religious language or passion as part of the *solution* to abuse (Brown & Bohn, 1989). Yet, it was undeniable that a woman's religious faith might shape her experience and disclosure of battery and the road she would choose to travel in her quest for wholeness in its aftermath (Boehm, Golec, Krahn and Smyth, 1999; Clarke, 1986; Fiorenza & Copeland, 1994; Halsey, 1984). There was mounting evidence that some abused women were turning to their religious leaders for assistance (Rotunda, Williamson and Penfold, 2004; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Horton & Williamson, 1988; Weaver, 1993). But the story of what happened when men, women, and children looked to their faith community after terror occurred at home was yet to be told.

For almost twenty years, my research program has been attempting to fill this void through a series of studies—both quantitative and qualitative—aimed at understanding the interface between religion and domestic violence. Some religious survivors claim their faith sustains them through the protracted, ugly reality of domestic abuse. It empowers them, through spiritual and practical resources, to flee the abuse and seek safety and solace in a context free from the violence of the past. Others are consumed by the sacred silence, fighting demons both within and without. They are ultimately prevented from leaving behind the fear or reality of abuse.

There are many angles to the story of abuse in families of faith, some connected to survivors, or to perpetrators, or to those professionals who seek to offer them support or accountability in its aftermath. In this article, I propose to begin to unravel some of the complexities in the relationship between faith and domestic violence, and the struggle to build bridges between secular and sacred community response networks.

This article draws on results that emerge from the following studies:

- Tensions, Contradictions and Collaborations between clergy and transition house workers in Canada (Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997; Nason-Clark, 1996).
- Pastoral Knowledge and Experience of Abuse in Congregational Life (Nason-Clark, 1997, 1998b).
- Pastoral Counseling and Abused Religious Women (Nason-Clark, 1999; Nason-Clark & Kroeger, 2004).
- Religious Women-Helping-Women Who are Abused (Bea-

man-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997; Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997b; Nason-Clark, 1995).

- Clergy in Mainline Denominations and Experience Responding to Abuse (Nason-Clark, 2000a, 2000d).
- Faith-Based Batterer Intervention Programs: a 10 Year File Study (Fisher-Townsend, Nason-Clark, Ruff, & Murphy, 2008; Nason-Clark, Murphy, Fisher-Townsend, & Ruff, 2003).
- Professionals Working with Male Batterers (Fisher-Townsend, 2008; Nason-Clark & Fisher-Townsend, 2005).
- Understanding the Stories of Men Who Act Abusively Over Time (Nason-Clark & Fisher-Townsend, 2008).
- Global Strategies to Understand and Respond to Abuse in Families of Faith (Nason-Clark, 2004).

I have attempted to harness some of the results from these selected studies to highlight four different perspectives, or experiences, which collectively help us to understand the web of connections surrounding Christianity and violence in the family context. Ultimately, we are challenged to ask: what does faith have to do with it?

Four Perspectives on the Experience of Religious Women Who have been Violated

Spiritual Dimensions of the Journey for a Survivor of Abuse

When religious women seek assistance from their pastor in the aftermath of domestic violence, they are looking for help with practical, emotional and spiritual needs (Nason-Clark and Kroeger, 2004). For women of faith, even some of the practical and emotional issues that surface have spiritual undertones. *Is it okay for a Christian to seek refuge at the local shelter? Should an abused woman enter the workforce, or continue to be a full-time mom? Does God expect a victim of her husband's abuse to forgive her husband seventy times seven?*

As a result, abused Christian women report that sometimes they feel pulled between what they perceive as the teachings of their church, including the behavior or advice of its leaders, and their personal safety and emotional health (Nason-Clark, 1999). Moreover, since many pastors do not refer abused women who seek their help to secular

community-based agencies, women who look for help in a variety of contexts (both within and beyond the household of faith) may feel that they have let their faith community down. Religious women suffering abuse are often disappointed to find that there is limited awareness and understanding of domestic violence by their leaders, modest knowledge of the resources available, and a lack of ability (or discomfort) to offer them help of an explicitly religious nature (i.e., prayer, Bible readings, spiritual counsel) (Nason-Clark, 1998).

When religious leaders speak out about violence during the weekly routine of church life, its impact on those who have been violated is profound (Kroeger, Nason-Clark and Fisher-Townsend, 2008). However, one of the best-kept secrets of congregational life is the support that women of faith offer to each other in and beyond the local church setting (Beaman-Hall and Nason-Clark, 1997b; Nason-Clark, 1995, 1997). One of the implications of this finding for those who practice social work is to gently encourage a woman of faith (who may feel cut off from her congregation or its leadership) to seek out other women in her church or religious network at her point of need. Like any disclosure of a personal nature, she will need to choose her confidantes wisely.

For over twenty years, through my research and speaking engagements, I have been hearing the stories of abused Christian women, told by survivors and those who have walked alongside them. Often their spiritual needs are primary on the road to personal well-being. Like a shattered window, an abused woman reports that her life as she knew it has been blown apart. Yet, the pastor and other community-based professionals, such as her lawyer, social worker, or advocates at a shelter, can help her to pick up the pieces of her broken life and reclaim strength and safety.

Many religious women want to maintain the illusion of an intact family (Nason-Clark, 1997; 2000a). She may be very reluctant to leave her husband and seek alternative solutions for personal safety and emotional health. She may cling unrelentingly to the promise she made, many years before, to love and honor her husband until death. She may feel it is her responsibility to keep on forgiving, to keep on trying to salvage the marriage, and to never give up hope that her husband might change. In point of fact, through our research we have found that most religious women who are abused do not consider themselves to be battered wives (Nason-Clark, 1996; 2004). On the contrary, they feel simply like their lives—and their families—are falling apart.

The resources that religious women seek in the aftermath of do-

mestic violence in part differentiate them from other abused women. They are often very reluctant to seek secular, community-based sources of support, preferring to look to others of like-minded faith for assistance—pastors and lay alike. Since many faith communities place the intact family on a pedestal, religious women are especially prone to blame themselves for the abuse, believe they have promised God to stay married until death, and experience both the fear and reality of rejection at church when attempts to repair the relationship fail.

It is imperative that those in the helping professions—like social workers—understand some of the unique and specific needs of clients who are very religious. As a bridge builder, a social worker can help to build an alliance between a community-based agency and communities of faith. Sometimes these bridges will be one person at a time: an abused woman on her caseload and her pastor. Sometimes these bridges will be agency or congregation specific: the mental health clinic and a downtown historic church. Other times, as a case manager, the social worker may be encouraging other professionals with whom she or he works to include a faith perspective around the collaborative community table.

In the aftermath of violence in the life of an abused woman, there are so many questions to be answered, questions that can only be addressed by someone with spiritual credentials, like a religious leader, or in-depth religious knowledge, like a faith-enriched therapist. Whether an abused religious woman first seeks help in a community-based agency or a church, she should be able to expect that her story of abuse is taken seriously, that she is given accurate, practical advice, that her safety and security is the top priority, and that her faith perspective is understood and respected. For many Christian women of deep personal faith, the experience of domestic violence in the family context is intricately intertwined with her spiritual life in such a way that it would be impossible to understand one separate from the other.

Perspectives of Men Who Participate in Faith-Based Batterer Intervention Programs

Justice, accountability, and change are all imperative features of intervention services offered to men who abuse their wives or intimate partners. While some come voluntarily, most men who attend batterer intervention classes do so because they have little or no choice in the

matter—they have been mandated by the courts as a result of a conviction for domestic violence, or referred by wives, therapists and/or clergy as a final gasp before the relationship is considered dead.

Religious women, in particular, are very hopeful that intervention programs can change violent men. Since many abused religious women do not wish to terminate their relationship with the abuser—either temporarily or forever—they hold out great faith that if only their partner were to attend such a program, the violence would cease and peace would be restored to the marriage. But is there any evidence upon which to base such hope?

In the first ever attempt to document empirically the characteristics of men who sought assistance from a faith-based batterers' intervention program in the United States, we analyzed over 1000 closed case files. Comparing this data to men in secular programs revealed that the faith-based program had a higher proportion of men who had witnessed or experienced abuse in their childhood homes, while rates of alcohol abuse and criminal histories were similar (Nason-Clark et al., 2003). Another finding to emerge from this data is the role of clergy in encouraging or "mandating" men who seek their spiritual help to attend a faith-based intervention program. In fact, men who were clergy-referred were more likely to complete (and graduate from) the 26 week program (followed by the six month monitoring phase, making a total of 52 weeks) than those whose attendance was mandated by a judge (Fisher-Townsend et al., 2008). Since the faith-based program participants have more life stability factors (currently married, employed, higher education, etc.) this may reinforce their willingness to complete the program and to alter their abusive ways (Nason-Clark et al., 2003). Sharing a religious worldview with the other men in the program may actually provide a *safe place* for these abusive men to challenge themselves and each other, and look toward a day when their abusive past will no longer control their present reality (Nason-Clark, 2004).

Some men in the program do not complete the entire 52-week program and "graduate." Rather, they drop out, or attend only periodically—when a crisis occurs or an ultimatum is given. Those who are court-mandated must complete 52 classes or face the implications of their non-compliance. In this state-certified program, there are several groups a week, each with at least 15 men and two facilitators.

The curriculum is not dissimilar to that of a secular program, but the agency's staff includes only men and women committed to their

Christian faith. When the men raise issues of spirituality, religion, or the Bible, the facilitators respond using the language of their various faith traditions. They are knowledgeable about the Bible and well prepared to counter any claims made by program participants that Scripture justifies abuse or violent acts. They hold men accountable using both secular and religious language. For men of faith, this is very powerful. Here a man's religious ideology is harnessed in ways that have the potential to nurture, monitor, and reinforce a violent-free future.

While we might be tempted to conclude that these results relate only to faith-based programs, there are some very important lessons here for those who work with the violated or those who act abusively. It is extremely useful to harness any spiritual resources that might add weight to either the criminal justice or therapeutic response to violence in the family context. For men of faith, the word of a pastor carries weight (Fisher-Townsend, Nason-Clark, Murphy and Ruff, 2008). Since many faith traditions offer a *language of hope* and a theology that includes *new beginnings*, building bridges between a religious man who acts abusively and his pastor increases the possibility of the man doing the work needed to change his behavior, while at the same time providing enhanced accountability as that work progresses.

Yet, there is great reluctance amongst batterers to assume responsibility for their actions (Ptacek, 1988b; Scott & Wolfe, 2000). When they begin the program, most of the men are unwilling—and some are unable—to interpret their acts as abusive. *I am not violent* is a common phrase used by the men in their early days of program attendance (Fisher-Townsend et al., 2008). Some interweave spiritual overtones. They talk about submission, or authority, or hierarchy in the family. But most talk only indirectly about these issues, choosing instead references to how she *pushed their buttons*. Men both justify what they have meted out to their partner and blame her for the abuse. Essentially, most of the men believe, at least in the early days of coming to the agency, that they are entitled to certain things in a relationship and angry when their expectations are not met.

When religious leaders are able to walk alongside abusive men who are committed to their religious tradition, everyone in the family has the potential of direct benefit. It is very powerful for a man who has acted abusively to see his faith community as supportive of his decision to change and pursue wholeness. In this way, pastors and other religious leaders are uniquely positioned to augment the process of recovery.

For social workers and others involved in the helping professions, it is critical to see the centrality of the religious belief system for many men who have acted abusively. It is a key component of their social context (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1998; Ptacek, 1988a), used to justify or defend their proclivity to power and control (Bancroft, 2002; Gondolf, 2002). Concepts such as submission reinforce these notions of religious entitlement (Shupe, Stacey, & Hazlewood, 1987). In this way, religious leaders and faith-enriched therapeutic staff are unique resources in any community-based efforts to create safe and peaceful homes. Faith is a core construct, central to any understanding of male entitlement, power and control.

Clergy Responding to Domestic Violence

From our studies of religious leaders, we have learned how difficult it is for pastors to see their intervention as successful if the marriage ended in divorce. Many clergy feel pressure to keep families together and marriages intact. In this way, pastoral counselors frequently find themselves in a very difficult double-bind: they are stalwart supporters of family values, including a reluctance to see any couples divorce, yet many of the families who seek their counsel need to separate in order to ensure the safety of all. Often with limited training, and a lack of resources at their disposal, they have not yet learned to identify that it is the relationship that has failed, not their advice.

Based upon data from over 300 conservative Protestant ministers, we learned that 98 percent have counseled a woman who has suffered from her husband's verbal aggression, 53 percent have helped a woman where the physical aggression of her partner involved activities like shoving or pushing, and 29 percent of pastors have been called upon to respond to a woman who has been repeatedly battered by her intimate partner.

While pastors differ greatly in their counseling experience and the advice that they offer, we found no evidence in our studies with pastors that they deliberately or directly dismiss an abused woman's call for help (Nason-Clark, 1997). Translating the rhetoric of "happy family living" into practical help for women, men, and couples in crisis is no easy task. It is time consuming and emotionally draining for the pastor, it is often discouraging, there are few simple answers, and the rewards can seem to be in short supply. As a result, pastoral counselors sometimes feel like they are caught in the cross-fire between the ideology of the family that

their denominations and churches hold dear and the nature, severity, and persistence of male aggression and abuse. In reality, clergy are far more likely to offer practical advice and support than they are to provide direct spiritual counsel, or explicit religious activities like prayer.

However, pastors are often slow to suggest dissolution of even a violent marriage and quite optimistic about the possibility of change in the life of a man who has acted abusively. But clerical optimism is frequently tempered by the unwillingness of such men to engage in the therapeutic process or to change their violent ways. When abuse is obvious and unrelenting, clergy appear to be motivated to bring safety and security to all. However, when the severity and the impact of abuse are obscured by other factors like alcohol abuse, clergy appear to have greater difficulty both identifying the battery and understanding the need for safety or healing for the victims.

Referral networks can help to ensure that the experts are identified and that inadequate pastoral training does not translate into poor or life-threatening counsel for abused women and their children. For many religious leaders, faith is integral to any response to abuse. Through referrals, faith-enriched counselors in secular agencies, or personnel in faith-based counseling agencies have the opportunity to bridge the gap between religious and non-religious resources. By inviting religious leaders to participate in any coordinated community responses to combat domestic violence, secular workers in therapeutic or criminal justice environments become acquainted with the unique needs of highly religious men and women. As an added impact, religious leaders who may be reluctant to make the first step are educated about domestic violence and also benefit from their interface with counselors. As a result, clergy become better equipped to offer best practices to people of faith who suffer the impact of domestic violence, victim and victimizer alike.

The Coordinated Community Response

Building bridges of collaborative action between community agencies and religious congregations is an enormous challenge. While recent years have witnessed many innovative projects that involve selected features of a coordinated community response, such as specialized domestic violence courts, or law enforcement officers who are uniquely trained to respond to cases of domestic violence and work in a multi-disciplinary context, most community-enhanced efforts to combat

domestic violence or respond to its victims do not include a role for spiritual leaders. However, pastors and other religious professionals play a critical role in calling religious men to accountability and offering spiritual and practical support to women and children who have been victimized by male aggression in the family context.

Over the years, our data has revealed several reasons why it is central to include religious leaders as part of any collaborative community response to domestic violence (Nason-Clark, 2006). These include the fact that religious leaders are chosen by many victims, chosen by some abusers, invested with moral authority, regarded as experts on marriage and the family, able to offer spiritual comfort and guidance, in regular contact with many who are marginalized by society, able to provide ongoing support after the crisis period is over, and skilled in talking about hope. Moreover, religious leaders provide educational and other resources to all age groups and many clergy have access to men, women and children at the point of individual crisis.

Religious women can be especially vulnerable when abused, for they are very likely to hold the intact family in high esteem and to consider separation and divorce as unsatisfactory options. Thus a community response needs to include input from various faith traditions if it wishes to meet the needs of all people who live in any given jurisdiction. When a pastor or other religious leader explains to a follower that "abuse is wrong" and a violation of how their faith tradition understands marriage before God, it has a powerful impact, much more powerful than the same words spoken by a social worker to an abused religious woman. Of course, not all members of faith communities will want assistance from their religious leader when domestic violence impacts the family home. However, for those who do, it is critical that such help be made available; it is critical, too, that the religious leader be informed and comfortable with referring parishioners to community agencies that work with victims or abusers. Referrals between resource providers are essential, yet our data has revealed that among those clergy who are poorly trained to respond to domestic violence, there is a great reluctance to refer those who do come for their help.

Since many faith traditions celebrate "family values," it is imperative that the leaders speak out when abuse becomes the reality of family life. A coordinated community response needs to include these voices—especially since they are invested with credibility by substantial numbers of people. As a result, they can offer comfort and guidance that is distinct from that

offered in community-based agencies. As religious leaders, they speak the language of the spirit—using the sacred texts, prayers, and other rituals inherent in their faith tradition. Breaking the cycle of violence often requires both the input of secular culture and support from the religious community and its leadership. There are specific religious contours both to the abuse that is suffered by people of deep faith and to the healing journey. As a result, many in the secular therapeutic community do not like to work with clients who are particularly religious (Nason-Clark, McMullin, Fahlberg and Schaefer, 2009; Whipple 1987). Without spiritual credentials, these workers find it difficult to challenge the religious ideation that is believed by the victim or perpetrator to give license to abuse.

For collaborative ventures between churches and community agencies to be successful in the fight to end to domestic violence—what I like to call paving the pathway between the steeple and the shelter—personnel from both paradigms must recognize the need to work together (Nason-Clark, 1997). A cultural language that is devoid of religious symbols, meanings, and legitimacy is relatively powerless to alter a religious victim's resolve to stay in the marriage no matter what the cost. Moreover, curbing violent behavior amongst religious men who believe they are entitled by their tradition to behave in this way must include spiritual language condemning the violence and religious resources to empower hope and change. Correspondingly, the language of the spirit must also include references to practical resources and secular knowledge. Otherwise, spiritual language alone may compromise a *victim's* need for safety, security, and financial resources to care for herself and her children or a *perpetrator's* need for justice and restraint.

Building bridges takes time. It is hard work. It involves negotiating the delicate terrain of egos, values, disciplinary boundaries, and divergent strategies for a common goal. Yet, there is evidence that when you choose carefully with whom you will build bridges—looking for those with skills, training, and commitment—it is amazing what a coordinated community response can achieve (Nason-Clark, Mitchell, & Beaman, 2004).

What Does Faith have to do with Domestic Violence?

Based on twenty years of social science research, there is ample evidence that religious faith and domestic violence are co-mingled. The story of why a religious woman, man, teen, or child looks to his or her

faith community for help in the aftermath of domestic violence is replete with spiritual overtones, as it is with practical issues. The story of what happens when help is sought is more diverse. Looking at the interface between religion and domestic violence from different vantage points reveals several unique features of the journey towards justice, safety, healing, and wholeness for a religious victim or perpetrator of abuse. Whether an abused religious woman, or a religious man who acts abusively, is offered help first by their church, or through a community-based agency, it is critical that those who respond understand *both* the issue of domestic violence and the nature of religious faith. While safety and security must always be the first priority, accurate, practical advice is also imperative, offered in a way that respects one's faith traditions and professional best practices. Assisting men and women of deep faith in the aftermath of abuse in the family context often requires an in-depth knowledge of that community of faith. Many of the religious issues that surface require dialogue with someone possessing spiritual credentials—like a pastor—or spiritual sensitivity—like a faith-enriched therapist. In this way, religious leaders and agencies that offer either a faith-perspective or faith-sensitive staff are unique resources in any community-based effort to create safe and peaceful homes.

Perspectives informed by faith must be part of the solution to a community-based response to domestic violence. Perspectives informed by secular training, experience and credentials must be part of the solution to a faith-based response to domestic violence. For this to happen—for bridges to be built between churches and their communities and for the movement between them to be bi-directional—there must be mutual respect and mutual understanding, built on a foundational belief that ending domestic violence involves the entire community. ♦

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