

## **Domestic and Family Violence: A Presbyterian Church of Victoria Response A Statement on Domestic and Family Violence (DFV)**

The Presbyterian Church of Victoria is firmly opposed to all forms of domestic and family violence. Husbands are specifically told "...Love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph.5:25) and are warned, to love their "...wives and not be harsh with them..." and to live with them "...in an understanding way" (Col. 3:17; 1Pet. 3:7).

Therefore, any attempt to twist the biblical teaching to tacitly sanction domestic violence or abuse is a gross perversion of the Bible's teaching. Domestic and family violence is repugnant to God and an anathema to the biblical model of sacrificial love and service.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, the Australian public has been made increasingly aware of the problem of domestic and family violence, especially violence against women and children. The widespread concern about this issue culminated in the domestic violence campaigner Rosemary Batty being made Australian of the Year in 2015.

In February of the previous year, her former partner, Greg Anderson, stabbed to death their 11-year-old son, Luke. Rosemary Batty has justifiably won great public sympathy for the tragic murder of her son. Like her, the overwhelming majority of Australians are eager to take a strong stand against domestic and family violence to ensure that Luke's tragic death will not have been in vain.

In some ways, the church has been both slow and unsure how to respond helpfully. This paper is a brief endeavour to understand the issue, chart the biblical teaching, condemn the sin and offer help to those affected in the Presbyterian Church of Victoria while making some observations on contributing factors that may be ameliorated.

### **Terminology: Domestic and Family Violence and Abuse**

DFV is the intentional and often systematic threat or use of violence to intimidate and control a partner, family member or someone under your care. It is important to note the ongoing abuse may include, spiritual, physical, sexual, emotional, social and/or financial control that results in a diminished ability and confidence to leave the abuser and find a haven.

The Victorian Family Violence Protection Act 2008 has the following explanation:

*Family violence is any behaviour that in any way controls or dominates a family member and causes them to **feel fear for their own, or other family member's safety or well-being.***

*It can include physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or economic abuse and any behaviour that causes a child to hear, witness, or otherwise be exposed to the effects of that behaviour.*

*A violent family member may use several forms of abuse and violence over time. An ongoing pattern of control, intimidation and fear is the most usual pattern of family violence that police respond to.*

### **Statistics: Domestic and Family Violence and Abuse**

DFV is about abuse and suffering, not statistics. However, statistics can help gauge the breadth and prevalence of the issue and so provide an overview. DFV is primarily experienced by women in Victoria and according to the Women's Health Victoria website (<http://whv.org.au>):

- Domestic violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged between 15 and 44 years.
- In Australia, 34% of women have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, and 19% of women have experienced sexual violence.
- 17% of women have experienced violence perpetrated by a partner, compared to 5.3% of men.
- Intimate partner homicides represent 60% of the 134 domestic homicides in Australia. 78% of the victims are women.
- One in four women escaping domestic violence are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, with Indigenous women 35 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence-related assaults than other Australian women.

According to the Crime and Statistics Victoria 2016 Report, the number of family incidents that required a Victorian Police Assessment and Risk Management Report has risen from 46,993 in 2012 to 76,529 in 2016. This increase could be explained by improved awareness, reporting and police training among other things but it remains a significant escalation.

Over 40,000 family violence intervention order applications were made in Victoria ending March 2016 according to the Victorian Crime Statistic Agency (<https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/>). If we were also to acknowledge abortions as perhaps the most extensive manifestation of domestic violence, then it becomes clear that the home is not the haven it ought to be.

### **Biblical Data and DFV**

#### **Male, Female and Complementary Marriage Roles**

God created humankind, male and female, and gave them the creation mandate to be fruitful and create culture (Gen 1:26-28). The complementary roles (equal and different) of male and female are not only biological but social too. This becomes evident in Gen. 2:18 where Eve is God's provision for Adam of a "helper fit for him." Together, Adam and Eve, male and female, are "*one flesh*." These complementary natures of male and female are obvious prerequisites for the task of both filling and subduing the earth (creating family, society and culture).

Of course, the Fall marked the entry of sin and brokenness that defaces and distorts the

complementary relationship of male and female even in the covenant of marriage. Nonetheless, the gospel ameliorates the effects of the Fall and seeks to restore the complementarity within marriage, calling on men to lead their families and love their wives in a Christ-like, sacrificial way.

Husbands are specifically told “...*Love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*” (Eph.5:25) and are warned, to love their “...*wives and not be harsh with them*” (Col. 3:19). The Apostle Peter, expects husbands to “...*live with their wives in an understanding way*” (1Pet. 3:7) which requires him to lovingly know and meet her needs. Likewise, wives are also told to love and respect their husbands, and to submit to their leadership (Eph. 5:22; Col 3:18; 1Pet. 3:1).

Therefore, any attempt to twist the biblical teaching of male (servant) leadership and a wife’s voluntary submission to tacitly sanction domestic violence or abuse is a gross perversion. Nowhere in Scripture is a husband told to force his wife to submit, any more than a wife is told to cajole her husband to lead. Domestic and family violence is repugnant to God, nowhere condoned in Scripture, and an anathema to the biblical model of sacrificial love and service.

### **God, Justice and Righteousness**

Domestic and family violence demands a strong response from the church. Our God is the defender of the weak. He despises those who neglect, mistreat or exploit the weak. Deut. 10:18 reminds us that God “*executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.*”

Unsurprisingly, he expects the same from his people. Deut. 24:17 says, “*You shall not pervert justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. And all God’s people shall say Amen.*” As Micah 6:8 says, “*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*”

The prophet Zechariah also, reminds the people of God in 7:9-10:

*“Thus says the LORD of hosts, render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.”*

2 Sam. 8:15 tell us that David was considered a great king because he “... *administered justice and equity to all his people.*” In 1 Kings 10:9, King Solomon is reminded that, as with all kings, God “*made you king over them, that you may execute justice and righteousness.*”

Unfortunately, most of the kings of Israel, most of the time, failed to do this. In the Book of Amos, God roars at the perversion of justice and righteousness among his people (Amos 1:2; 2:6-7; 4:1; etc.). In Amos 5:24, he calls Israel through her king to “*let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*”

Ultimately, the prophets look to a second David to bring in a Kingdom of justice and righteousness. In Isaiah 9:7 it is written,

*“Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”*

Again, Isaiah 42:1-4 says,

*“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”*

Christ’s Kingdom then, is a Kingdom of righteousness and justice (Matt. 5:1-6:33). Jesus speaks of the good Samaritan to show us how loving our neighbour can require the intervention of justice and mercy (Matt. 22:39; Luke 10:30-37) when seeking to *“...do good to everyone, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”* (Gal. 6:10)

James summarises this in James 1:27:

*“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”*

Needless to say, any form of abusing or misusing position, power or violence to control others is the antithesis of gospel teaching and example. By Christ’s example, following Him involves serving others, not manipulating and controlling them. Jesus said in Mark 10:43-35,

*”But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

To love one another is to serve one another as Christ served us. Eph. 5:1-2 reminds us,

*“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*

Therefore, the church should be seen as taking a clear and strong stand against domestic and family violence and doing all in their power to keep people safe, which may include supporting the victim leaving the home, pressing charges or even an intervention order.

## **Pastoral Considerations and DFV**

Thankfully, research seems to indicate that women married to men who regularly attend church are the group least likely to experience violence from their husbands. After analysing all of the data, University of Virginia sociology professor, W. Bradford Wilcox, in his book *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*, concluded:

*These findings paint a striking picture...Contrary to the assertions of feminists, many family scholars, and public critics, these men cannot be fairly described as “abusive”, and “authoritarian” family men wedded to “stereotypical forms of masculinity.” They outpace mainline Protestant [egalitarian] and unaffiliated family men in their emotional and practical dedication to their children and wives and in their commitment to familism [a family-centred spirituality], and they are the least likely to physically abuse their wives.*

It is important to note, that while we are thankful that the gospel does provide real protection against DFV, when it does occur in the church, it can be more difficult to deal with. Due to a high view of the marriage covenant, as well as a robust confidence in a God who can change people, Christian women may feel reluctant to leave an abusive marriage. Coupled with the manipulating behaviour of the abuser, and little discussion of the issue from pulpits, it can make seeking help or even contemplating leaving an abusive marriage incredibly difficult.

Moreover, domestic violence is almost always hidden and is therefore by definition very hard to detect. Characteristically, abusers do not walk out of their marriages as they are addicted to the power, privilege and control they exert in the home. In most cases, there will be resistance to any church intervention in an abusive home, coupled with deceit and manipulation as the abuser hides his sin and protects his control. Despite the obvious complexities that surround DFV, when there is harm or the threat of harm, the abused person should be counselled to immediately remove themselves and any others at risk from that home and relocate to a “safe place,” wherever that might be. In such circumstances, appropriate authorities should be contacted, and any crimes reported as required by the State (Rom. 13:1-4).

While there is debate among Christians concerning DFV as a basis of divorce, there is no debate concerning the safety of separation. It is our view that where someone’s safety is at risk, and cannot be remedied, then DFV falls into the same category as adultery and abandonment as a cause for divorce (WCF 24:5). Violence enacted in any form, including social, financial, emotional, or physical, so breaches the one-flesh union as to have already affected separation. Even if (as in most situations) the abused is the one to flee, it is because the violence drove them away and should be more properly viewed as the abuser having left first. Given that their actions are consistent with those of an unbeliever, it seems that 1 Cor. 7:12-15 is an appropriate application to the situation.

This understanding has a long history that goes back to the Westminster Divines. As quoted in the 1992 Presbyterian Church of America position paper on “Marriage and Divorce”, the Puritan, William Perkins, in his work on the Christian family states:

*Like unto desertion is malicious and spiteful dealing of married folks one with the other. Malicious dealing is, when dwelling together, they require of each other intolerable conditions ...if the husband threateneth hurt, the believing wife may fife in this case; and it is all one, as if the unbelieving man should depart. For to depart from one, and drive one away by threat, are equipollent.*

Regardless of debate over divorce and remarriage, there should be no debate concerning the safety of the abused. Protection for every man, woman, and child should be paramount. A violent husband drives his wife away. No woman should be asked or encouraged to stay in an abusive situation, and we must be ready to do all we can to be supportive in securing her relief.

The following suggestions offer practical means of support:

Minimise barriers:

- Publicly acknowledge that abuse happens in marriages within the church.
- Talk sensitively about headship, remembering that not everyone gets it right.
- Listen, understand and empathise with the abused.
- Affirm that the abused is not to blame, and the fault lays entirely at the abuser's feet.
- Reassure the abused of the church's support and love.

Maximise safety:

- Assist in removing the abused from dangerous situations and find them safe havens.
- Encourage the abused to seek help from both ecclesiastical and secular authorities.
- Stand with the abused through the pain of accusations from the abuser.
- Support the abused through the ongoing practical, emotional and spiritual challenges.
- Be prepared to expel the abuser from the congregation.

Commit to being better educated on the issues that surround DFV as it's foundational to a proper pastoral response.