

Domestic violence and the Methodist Church - the way forward

The Report and Recommendations on Domestic Violence and the Methodist Church

Summary

This report, produced by Women's Network and the Family and Personal Relationships Committee (the sponsors), seeks to inform Conference of the urgent need for the Methodist Church to respond to domestic violence as it affects both church members and people in our wider society. The report is based on research carried out to establish the nature of the Church's involvement in responding to domestic violence and suggests appropriate ways forward embodied in the resolutions.

Domestic Violence affects large numbers of people, both adults and children alike. The Government has identified domestic violence as one of the major problems to be tackled within Family Policy and Crime reduction. During the World Council of Churches designated 'Decade to Overcome Violence' 2001-2010 several documents have been produced looking at this issue.

Domestic violence has been defined as 'Any violence between current or former partners in an intimate relationship, wherever and whenever the violence occurs. The violence may include physical, emotional or financial abuse' (Department of Health 2000)

How do churches, ministers, and others with pastoral responsibility respond when approached by someone affected by domestic violence? What should the Church's response be?

In 1999 Women's Network and the Family and Personal Relationships Committee (were offered the opportunity to explore the Church's role in relation to domestic violence. A research project outline was developed and subsequently chosen as one of the first pieces of research to be conducted by the Roehampton University of Surrey under the auspices of the new Southlands Methodist Centre. The sponsors are grateful to the Southlands Methodist Centre for making 'The Way Forward' project possible. The research was conducted by Lorraine Radford and Cecilia Cappel whose subsequent report has been received by a working group set up by the sponsors. The Church now needs to recognise the tough findings from the research and act upon its implications.

Background Information

The reply to a Memorial to Conference 2001 stated that a report would come to Conference based on the two-year action project on violence against women by the Women's Network of the Methodist Church.

The Substance of the Report

This report contains references to ecumenical ways of working as the work is progressed

About the study

The aim of the research project was to gain as broad and as detailed a picture as possible of the Church's involvement in the field of domestic violence. Lay workers and ministers were asked about their experiences of domestic violence, both personally and in their work, by means of:

- i. 1000 postal questionnaires sent to ministers and lay workers during the summer of 2000. It asked about their direct and indirect work regarding domestic violence, and their own attitudes, beliefs and experiences of abuse as adults and/or children. 557 questionnaires were returned completed and were computer-analysed.
- ii. Follow-up interviews with a small number of ministers (17) to explore in more depth issues raised in the questionnaire survey;
- iii. In depth interviews and communications with a small number of domestic violence survivors (11) who were also ministers, church members or lay workers;
- iv. Information gathering on good practice examples and initiatives that have developed with the help of some Church support.

The Experience of Domestic Violence in the Church

The research showed that domestic violence is clearly an issue that has affected the lives of many Church members, especially, though not exclusively, women. Whilst 83% said that they had never personally experienced domestic violence in their relationships, 17% of the questionnaire respondents had done so, 13% several times and 4% frequently.

The prevalence and the type of abuse reported showed stark differences in the experiences of men and women. 1 in 4 female respondents (the same level as found in the British Crime Survey 1999) and 1 in 9 male respondents reported experiencing domestic violence {personally} from a partner as an adult. The main perpetrators of domestic violence were husbands and male partners (53% of situations).

Domestic violence often persists over a long period. While 25% of those who had experienced violence had done so for a year or less (this included some male respondents who described 'one off' incidents), 54% had experienced it for up to 5 years and 21% for 10 years or more. One female minister reported living with her abuser for 30 years. Nine respondents said that the abuse was still going on. 1 in 5 respondents (19%) had lived with and witnessed domestic violence as children.

Attitudes about domestic violence

Overall the research found a polarisation in views about domestic violence among ministers and lay workers. There was some disagreement about how domestic violence is defined and how prevalent it is, but considerable agreement about the way that it affects people's lives.

This most probably reflects the different levels of experience respondents had from directly working with these issues. There was no association between beliefs about domestic violence and age or gender, although younger ministers and lay workers were more likely to say they were unsure about their views.

Female ministers and lay workers were more likely to say they disagreed with the view that domestic violence is mostly perpetrated by males against their female partners. Female ministers were also more likely to disagree with the views that violence stops on separation and women invariably go back to live with their abusers.

Christian Beliefs

Almost three-quarters of ministers and lay workers surveyed (74%) felt that their approach to domestic violence had been influenced by their Christian beliefs. Some ministers interviewed felt that the Church was either out of touch on this issue or seen to be out of touch with the rest of society. Christian beliefs seemed to afford ministers little guidance on how to support families living with domestic violence. Even though many said that they were deeply concerned about the issue and would try to help families in this situation, the majority seemed confused and unsure. Many saw a conflict in the Church's thinking on marriage, endurance, redemption, forgiveness and violence. A few discussed justice and the importance of transformation in the context of violence and abuse. All the survivors interviewed said they stayed longer with abusive partners because they felt they had an extra responsibility to preserve their marriages.

'Repeatedly I was told by my Methodist Minister husband that it was my duty as a Christian to forgive. My children were told the same. I was repeatedly told that as a Christian I had promised in my marriage vows 'For better, for worse É.' Initially I strove as a Christian very committed to marriage to forgive but I came to see that although apparently there was a duty for me to forgive, there was no mention of repentance or sorrow on my husbands part or if there was, the words would prove to be insincere and abuse would soon start again.' Ex-wife of minister

'I pretended it wasn't happening. There was one occasion when he hit me in public É he just walloped me round the head with a bible. And all I wanted to do was to turn around and scream at everybody. 'This is what he does to me all the time'. And actually what you do is turn it into a joke and people then thought it was funny and it was actually only after the marriage broke up that one or two of them said to me, 'Oh yes, he hit you then'. Woman Minister

Although survivors had found individual colleagues who were very understanding and supportive, the Church as a whole was perceived to have dealt with the issue very poorly, wanting, as one respondent put it 'brush the violence under the carpet'. Perpetrators, especially partners of ministers, were not expected to do anything about the abuse. Christian forgiveness was mostly seen to mean continuing to welcome an abuser as a member of the Church while an ex partner was excluded from Church attendance by fear.

As the researchers commented 'In general, we were left with the conclusion that Christian beliefs had played an ambiguous role in survivors' journey to safety, in some ways helping but in other ways hindering their efforts to overcome the abuse.'

Working against Domestic Violence

Many survivors found there were considerable resources available in the Church to help them to overcome the abuse — practical support, emotional support, generally 'rallying round'. However, the level of support varied according to location. In this respect the Methodist Church response is similar to that of the police, social services and other agencies. Getting a helpful response is dependent on where a person lives and the level of awareness of the issue. It means entering into the, "domestic violence lottery. "

Ministers who are abused by partners feel that they are in an especially vulnerable position, fearing loss of their jobs, home and vocation if they talk about the violence that is happening to them.

'It will damage your ministry if you walk out. What's more important to you? Partly the reason I stayed in the marriage was because I wanted to keep my job' Woman minister survivor

Direct work with families living with domestic violence

There was a great variation in ministers' and lay workers' direct work with women living with domestic violence. 51% percent of ministers and lay workers said they worked either frequently or occasionally with families living with domestic violence. The majority had a low level of direct contact — 80% said they were approached by 5 or less women each year.

Variations in the number of contacts are the result of a number of factors. The area or region in which a minister works had less impact than might be expected, although this is a relevant factor in socially excluded neighbourhoods where the church is often a resource of the last resort. Higher levels of contact were reported by deacons and by ministers who saw ministry as involving community work or healing, and by those involved in particular Church projects, with counselling skills or with an increased awareness of violence and abuse. Ministers with an outward looking emphasis to their ministry did the most work against domestic violence and played a more pro-active part in helping victims/survivors to find safety.

Most approaches came from women wanting to talk to someone or wanting spiritual or marriage guidance. The lack of guidance and access to information in this area can mean that a minister or lay worker can become overwhelmed. Referral to other agencies was seen to be an appropriate response for 59% of the ministers and lay workers who completed the questionnaire. The agencies varied but included social services, women's aid, children's projects, child contact centres, or to mediation. Most ministers were unaware of specific projects or agencies working with perpetrators of domestic violence.

Indirect and Community Work

For a number of years now Government multi-agency work against domestic violence has been an important part of the government policy response. However, ministers and lay workers in the Methodist Church reported a low level of involvement in community projects working against domestic violence.

Indirect work at the level of community was mostly the donation of goods from Harvest Festivals (49%), or other fund raising activities for the local refuge.

98% of respondents had no contact with a domestic violence forum although 1 in 5 respondents (19%) reported some involvement with domestic violence issues through contact with their local family centre.

The Way Forward — the Church as Resource

The research clearly indicated 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.

The research points to many practical and theological issues which need to be addressed as the church and individual Christians seek to move forward in this area. There are many implications around the theology of family life which have emerged as part of the study and these need to be addressed as part of the overall response of the Church.

Training is seen as an area where the Church needs to develop resources in collaboration and consultation with other agencies. Within Methodism, NCH and MHA have experience and expertise in this field.

Safety and security are seen as an issue and appropriate training should be made available to everyone who is involved in Domestic Violence issues including a data base of referral agencies and clear guidelines for good practice.

Recommendations

In order that the issues raised in this report are taken forward we recommend that:

The Methodist Council appoint a task group to include members of the Women's Network, the Family and Personal Relationships Committee and the Faith and Order Committee to manage and direct further work and study in the following four areas.

1. Theology

We recommend that, this group develops theological understanding on the theology of the family, the theology of violence, the theology of forgiveness and the theology of marriage In conjunction with the work recommended elsewhere in the Agendas.

2. Policy

To develop a policy on domestic violence for the Methodist Church

3. Practice Guidelines

To develop practice guidelines for use in the Methodist Church

4. Training

Working in co-operation with, and recognising the expertise of, other agencies working in this field, to identify and develop appropriate training on domestic violence to be used throughout the Methodist Church.

5. Monitoring

That the task group report back to Conference 2003 with progress and developments in these four areas.

Draft Resolutions

1. Conference recognises the deep implications that domestic violence has both within the Church and within the wider community.
2. Conference adopts the recommendations.
3. Conference invites the Methodist Churches and people to mark in appropriate ways November 25th, the internationally designated day of action on violence against women

Originators

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