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True Love? Family Violence and the Church

By Megan Blakie



Daphne Marsden

Photo by Mandy Caldwell

In her hit song 'True Love', popular American singer-songwriter Pink asserts that violence is an acceptable part of loving relationships, but Church communities may be endorsing a similar message, according to registered Baptist minister and family violence researcher, Daphne Marsden.

Just as the song's lyrics define love as a mix of hugs and hatred ("At the same time, I wanna hug you, I wanna wrap my hands around your neck... I really hate you so much, I think it must be true

love"), Daphne believes New Zealand churches may unwittingly or erroneously be condoning family violence.

"The Church community has still got the blinkers on," she says. "Most people...in a church community...think family violence is not there; pastors underestimate the rate of family violence that is in their congregations."

Daphne's stark words draw on her nearly two decades of work experience in pastoral care, working with women and families, and her research for a post-graduate thesis. The research was undertaken as part of a Masters of Theology, which she completed last year at Laidlaw College. Her thesis is entitled, "Dishonoured and Unheard: Christian Women, Domestic Violence and the Church".

Christchurch-based Daphne has also authored a chapter in an American published book co-edited by Canadian academic and sociologist Nancy Nason-Clark. Nancy is considered an international expert in the field of family violence within the Christian community.

Men and women with a range of church affiliations - including Baptist, Catholic, and Anglican - were invited to contribute to the book. Called, *'Strengthening Families and Ending Abuse: Churches and their leaders look to the future'*.

"Yes, family violence does occur in the Christian

community; it's not something that doesn't exist because we're Christian," says Daphne.

For the past 18 years, Daphne has been instrumental in the running of *Project Esther*, a community ministry she formed under the umbrella of the South West Baptist Church (formerly known as Spreydon Baptist Church). The project operates as a charitable trust.

As a Community Ministry Leader there, she is responsible for a staff team of seven and many volunteers. The trust offers a range of assistance and support to at-risk women and their families, with a particular focus on resourcing single mothers.

"Project Esther is multi-faceted; it doesn't just work with domestic violence. Everything that we offer is to connect Christians and non-Christians, so that there's an opportunity to establish relationships, and [provide] information and, hopefully, an introduction or an encouragement to journey towards Jesus," she explains.

"That's the reason behind everything we do: so that people encounter God's love and grace."

The organisation's range of services and activities include preschool music and movement classes, visiting and the provision of worship services at Christchurch Women's Prison, a support group for sexual abuse survivors, and emergency accommodation.

In the early days of the project, Christian women were among those who approached the organisation for emergency housing. That in itself was unexpected, but what surprised Daphne more was the fact the women often weren't receiving adequate or well informed support from their Christian friends and the wider church community.

"They thought the woman should go back to her husband, that marriage was for life. The church members didn't have a comprehension of the nature of power and control issues," says Daphne.

Family (domestic) violence is about power and control, rather than anger. The term can refer to deliberate acts of physical violence, but also to sexual, emotional or financial abuse or the threat of an intended act of aggression.

For a Christian woman, dealing with family violence is compounded by religious norms and expectations, especially those

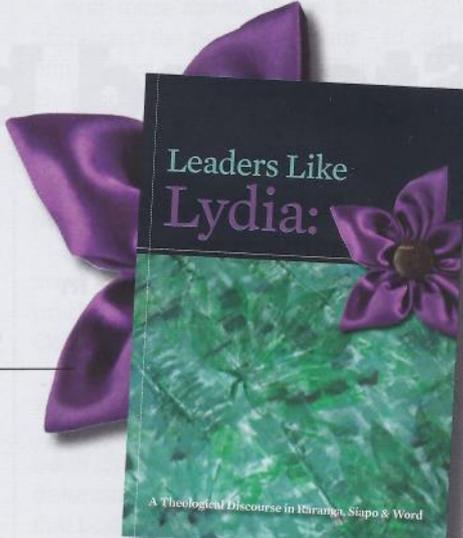
concerning marriage. In Daphne's experience, Biblical references to marriage - particularly those about covenants, headship and submission, turning the other cheek, and forgiveness - can be misused or misunderstood. As a result, inappropriate responses to family violence can contribute to the maintenance of unsafe situations for family members or, if the woman decides to leave her husband, to an increased sense of guilt or isolation.

"The woman leaving the marriage isn't breaking a covenant; it's already broken [by the man who's abused her]," says Daphne.

"God is a God of justice and compassion; I'm sure that God

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'Leaders like Lydia' reflects our theology as women in the Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia at this time. It demonstrates our diversity and our ability to gather and 'do' theology together. We hope that the creativity and theological reflection will inspire women to do theology in their place and seek God in everything they do – *The Venerable Carole Hughes*

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wouldn't want a woman (or her children) to stay in a position of not being safe."

Another factor that can affect the quality of pastoral care offered to families affected by domestic violence is the Christian belief in, and hopes for, 'instant' personal transformation. Daphne says that this can blind church communities to the reality of manipulative behaviours and potential risks to a family's safety. Signs of 'conversion' or forgiveness can be misinterpreted as being the end to any further abuse.

In her work at Project Esther, Daphne has seen examples of Christian men using prayer and the intention to be a 'good

Christian husband' as manipulative tactics to get their wife back. She says churches should be aware that such tactics can sometimes be used by an abusive person to gain a church's sympathy and support.

"We elevate marriage to an ideal that isn't always [so] in practice," says Daphne. "Family violence is alive and well and flourishing."

To start to tackle the problem, she suggests that ministers and pastoral carers make contact with violence prevention organisations in their local area, such as the local Women's Refuge.

"We need to deal with the issue collaboratively. A Christian woman has both the need for safety and the tending of her spiritual journey," she says. "So police, counsellors, Women's Refuge all have a contribution and part to play in a woman's plight, but we as the Church also need to relook and rethink

how we communicate spiritual values as they relate specifically to domestic violence and marriage."

She calls on theological institutions to equip church leadership with adequate training to deal effectively and sensitively to family violence situations they are likely to encounter during their ministry. She is especially passionate about what she describes as the 'just and good use of scripture'.

At a parish level, she believes it's important to walk the talk and for men and women to model shared leadership. She offers a bouquet to Anglicans, acknowledging that our Prayer Book worship uses inclusive language and that men and women work together in shared ministry and leadership.

For all the deficiencies in pastoral care that her research has highlighted, Daphne is living proof that church communities can be places of healing in the wake of family violence. Her



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own childhood was marred by such and she experienced what it's like to be at the receiving end of abuse.

As an adult, she feels very fortunate to have had received a level of help and support to be able to deal with, and eventually move on from, the effects of her childhood experiences.

"There have been three factors that have contributed signifi-

cantly to ...my wholeness: the company and investment of my Christian community – friendships and relationships; I had a lengthy period in counselling; and the other aspect is the whole dynamic of prayer."

"Those three things were significant factors for me and meant the dysfunction of my childhood didn't have the final say."

Serious about issues of family violence?

A CHECKLIST FOR PARISHES

1. **Do you offer a listening ear?** Show patience, empathy and genuine concern.
2. **Does your church washroom offer information about abuse?** One of the safest places to put up information about your local women's refuge is on the back of the doors in the women's toilets. The information can be read in privacy and safety.
3. **Does your congregation or ministry groups partner with local shelters/refuges?** Building bridges between the steeple and the shelter is of utmost importance.
4. **Is violence ever discussed in your church youth group?** Sadly, many religious parents underestimate the prevalence and severity of controlling and abusive behaviour among teens and emerging adults. Get the message out there: a controlling/abusive relationship is wrong; it is never part of God's design for healthy living.
5. **Do you make appropriate referrals to the resources in your community?** Know what resources and organisations are in your community and refer abuse victims and their families when appropriate. Collaboration enhances the credibility of the church and provides for the safety of victims in need.
6. **Is violence discussed in your pre-marital courses/counselling?**
7. **Do you realise the importance of spiritual resources for victims of abuse?** Believers who have been abused by a loved one often experience a flood of questions about their spiritual life. Why has God abandoned me? Do I need to keep on forgiving a man who hurts and threatens us? Clergy are uniquely situated to bring prayers and words of comfort and healing to the hurting.
8. **Does your congregation share the load?** We need to learn how to care for each other under the umbrella of God's love and provision –ordinary men and women of God helping and caring for each other. Clergy can't do it all.
9. **Do you offer ministry opportunities?** In time and with appropriate training and guidance a woman who was battered can indeed walk alongside another woman who is suffering. We all need ways that we can reach out to others.
10. **Do you hold violent, controlling men accountable for their actions?** Holding men accountable for their violent, controlling behaviour is one of the unique roles that clergy can fulfil in a coordinated community response to family violence.

(Based on a seminary talk by Christian sociologist Nancy Nason-Clark, April 2006)



Megan Blakie is a Christchurch based journalist and communications specialist. She enjoys writing prayers, and creating installations of an artistic or meditative nature that provoke and challenge people. She enjoys reading theology. With her husband and pet dog she spent two years sailing round the South Pacific, an experience that heightened her awareness of discarded plastics and other forms of marine pollution.

Archbishop David Moxon at the UNCWS

By Archdeacon Carole Hughes

"I am not free until all who are oppressed by modern slavery are free" said Archbishop David Moxon as he preached at the early morning worship service at the Church Centre of the United Nations in New York on 12th March. The Anglican Communion Women's Delegation was responsible in leading the worship. Archdeacon Carole Hughes, who is representing the Anglican Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCWS) was involved in organising the liturgy, welcoming everyone and introducing Archbishop David.

Later in the day, Archbishop David presided at the midday Eucharist and delivered an awe inspiring session on a multi-faith initiative for the eradication of modern slavery and human trafficking, deriving from a Global Faith Leaders declaration against slavery. "The things that horrified us about Charles Dicken's novels is back", says Archbishop David. He is an executive board member on the Global Freedom Network Association—a faith based initiative of Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

What can faith communities do? "Eighty percent of the world's population is influenced by religion", says Archbishop David. Faith communities have connections around the world.

A more extensive article about this year's UNCWS gathering will feature next month.



Mentoring Proposals Wanted

The three tikanga Council for the Anglican Women's Studies Centre invite lay or ordained Anglican Women in Ministry to submit proposals for consideration by the Council that can be recognized as opportunities for mentoring for individual women or groups of women. Submissions must identify the mentoring need/activity and if it requires a sharing of resources etc.

ALL ENQUIRIES TO:

Karena de Pont, Administrator for the Council of the Anglican Women's Studies Centre

Email: anglicanwomenstudies@gmail.com

Home/Office: +64 9 422-0102

The Centre for Anglican Women's Studies (WSC)

Karena de Pont, Administrator

Email: anglicanwomenstudies@gmail.com or anglican.wsc@clear.net.nz

Home Office Phone: + 64 9 422-0102 Cell Phone: 027 631-3083

General Synod Office Phone: + 64 9 521-4439 www.anglican.org.nz

Postal: General Synod Office, P O Box 87-188, Meadowbank, Auckland 1742, New Zealand



The Centre for Anglican Women's Studies, commonly known as the **Women's Studies Centre** was set up to serve and to advance the interests and needs of the women of this Church particularly those undertaking Theological training.

The Link Representatives from each Diocese and Hui Amorangi have been chosen for their leadership ability to identify, gather, facilitate, resource and encourage women in their educational preparation for ministry whether lay or ordained. It is hoped that the Women's Studies Centre can continue to enjoy the support of each Diocese and Hui Amorangi in this endeavour.



The issue of increasing numbers of women in representative positions across the councils and committees of the Church is seen as a high priority and the practice of intentional mentoring by those already in national and international representative roles is seen as a good way to expose women of this church to fulfill their potential as leaders.

Ensuring that women's voices and stories are heard now and in the future is also one of our continued aims whether it be by traditional methods of publication or using more contemporary technologies like website publication. We remain optimistic that through continued support, the needs of women throughout this Province will be valued and recognized.



Women's Studies Centre Council Members — 2015

TIKANGA MAORI -

- Revd Mere Wallace
mere.wallace@westcoastdwb.org.nz
- Revd Numia Tomoana
numia_5@hotmail.com

TIKANGA POLYNESIA -

- Revd C. Amy Chambers
mumsy@connect.com.fj
- Revd Evelini Langi
evelini_langi@yahoo.com

TIKANGA PAKEHA

- Revd Erice Fairbrother
ecfairbrother@waiapu.com
- Revd Carole Hughes (Convenor)
carolesunrise@xtra.co.nz

Women's Studies Centre Diocesan & Hui Amorangi Link Representatives

Diocese of Auckland -

- Revd Nyasha Gumbeze
tamarisk1999@yahoo.co.nz

Diocese of Christchurch -

- Revd Jenni Carter
jenni.carter@xtra.co.nz

Diocese of Dunedin

- Jenny Campbell
jennycam@xtra.co.nz

Diocese of Nelson

- No representative at present
Please contact Diocesan Office

Diocese of Waiapu

- No representative at present
Please contact Diocesan Office

Diocese of Waikato & Taranaki

- Revd Jacqui Paterson
craacq@xtra.co.nz

Diocese of Wellington

- Revd Jenny Chalmers
jenny@clear.net.nz

Diocese of Polynesia

- Refer to Tikanga Polynesia Councilors
(see above)

Hui Amorangi o te Tairawhiti

- Ruihana Paenga
ruihanaapaenga@gmail.com

Hui Amorangi o te Tai Tokerau

- Revd Jenny Quince
quincemail@xtra.co.nz

Hui Amorangi o te Manawa o te Wheke

- Rahera Biddle
R.biddle@pirirakauhauora.org.nz

Hui Amorangi o te Upoko o te Ika

- Revd Leonie Joseph
raulee04@xtra.co.nz

Hui Amorangi o te Waipounamu

- The Ven Mabel Grennell
mabel.tekorowai@xtra.co.nz

EDITORIAL DISCLAIMER: The Women's Studies Centre is committed to encouraging and enabling women's voices and perspectives from across the diversity of the Church to be shared more widely. We acknowledge that women's experiences of church differ considerably and that resultant theological perspectives also differ considerably. In general the WSC does not exercise editorial control, rather we welcome as many voices as are willing to contribute.