

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE CHURCH COMMUNITY: PROJECT ANNA

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IN DEDICATION TO CHRISTIAN WOMEN WHO ARE VICTIMS/SURVIVORS OF violence in their own homes, in their own congregations and in their own churches. For many of these women, Project Anna marked the first time in which their voices, their lived experiences, had been truly heard.

Thank God, we have heard in our own lifetime, the words for a suffering that was kept in darkness (survivor of sexual assault perpetrated by a member of the clergy).

Hearing Voices Speaking . . .

Where is God in all of this? I thought He cared about what happens to us? Well, that's one of the cruellest lies the Church tells. If He was going to look after anyone He should have stopped my father from abusing me when I was a child, and He should have stopped the vicar from trying to have sex with me (woman, aged 24).

I hear the clergy speaking of justice for all, especially in third world countries, and I wonder if they are blind and do not see that more than half of the congregation sitting in front of them is experiencing injustice at the hands of the church they represent . . .

And then we sing hymns which speak of us all as 'brothers' and 'sons' of God the Father, and we have made promises to obey our husbands when we married them, and we have to take our children to a man to be baptised and confirmed. There are just no messages that I, as a woman, am really equal in God's eyes (woman, aged 43).

Violence against women is a manifestation of the abuse of power. The way in which the abuse of power is expressed can vary, but the intention is always to exert control over the victim. Definitions of violence against women must always take into account the experiences of women.

The countless courageous Christian women who have broken the silence on violence within the Church have given credence to the fact that the Church, alongside the rest of society, is not immune to the sin and crime of violence.

It has become painfully clear that the Church has neglected to critically review their male-dominated institutions, thus perpetuating the suffering of the large group of women and children victims/survivors within their walls. Hand in hand with this, both history and current disclosures have revealed that the mainly male leadership has acted to protect and comfort the perpetrators of the violence and to attempt to maintain what could be named a 'white-washed sepulchre'—in other words, an image of the Church which indicates its innocence in this matter—an image which covers up its culpability around the issue.

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.

Far too often we hear reports of women being encouraged to co-exist within violent relationships. Prayer is offered as a tool of adaptation to violence and the faithfulness of Christian women is exploited to maintain their submission to violent and abusive husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, uncles and acquaintances.

Disclosures to us by women which have brought us to this understanding have been, and continue to be, almost overwhelming. Women of all ages speak of sexual assault, incest, racial violence, bashings, psychological, emotional and spiritual trauma, financial and social restrictions—all within 'Christian families'. Offenders are ordinary Christian men: church-attending husbands, fathers, grandfathers, brothers, friends. In many cases the perpetrators are members of the ordained leadership: clergy, priests, ministers, pastors, leaders of church-sponsored groups.

In too many cases it has been seen that the Church has adopted the cultural norm of the 'privacy' and 'maintenance' of the family over the disclosure of the violent acts within it. All too common are the reports of the rape, assault and incest victim seeking help from the clergy and experiencing patronising, inadequate 'victim blaming' or 'silencing' responses.

Instead of experiencing sound theological support and referral to appropriate community agencies, these victims of violence, who are in the midst of life crisis, are directed to 'accept God's will', 'suffer gladly', 'keep praying for healing' or 'be more faithful and the violence will stop'.

And it must be stated that, subsequent to the publication of the *Pastoral Report* (Last 1990) and the research conducted among church-attending Anglican families for a forthcoming report, *Hearing Voices*, Project Anna has recognised even more strongly the serious consequences of violence for the Church as a community which reinforces its image as a 'family' of God.

Congregational members go to church expecting a nurturing, caring environment—a safe place to grow in faith. In this setting, women and children are especially vulnerable to sexual assault and exploitation. There is usually a power imbalance in the congregational

'family'. Clergymen and male congregational or parish leaders are officially entrusted with the care and shepherding of souls. They are the ones with the greater power within the pastoral situation.

When this sacred trust is betrayed and woman or child is sexually assaulted by their church leader or another congregational member, then the crime is tantamount to family incest. The woman or child has been assaulted by one whom they have come to think of as a 'brother in Christ', someone who is, with them 'a child of God'.

And then, as with incest within the nuclear family, when a whole family is affected by this crime the assault of the one victim becomes the spiritual and psychological assault of the whole congregation. In hearing that the church leader is the perpetrator of this crime, the members of the Church confront many feelings and responses; denial, anger, disbelief—secrets are kept, rumours can take hold, people take sides and usually against the side of the victim.

The congregation or parish family goes through an entire range of grief emotions, for in a way there has been a 'death'. The death of the belief that the Church is a safe place. It becomes a highly ambiguous and charged situation, which can result in the loss of many members from the congregation.

Both the *Pastoral Report* (Last 1990) and *Hearing Voices* (Last & Gilmore 1993) argue strongly that this environment of unequal power, which lays the ground for violence to flourish, is obvious both in the Christian home and the Christian congregation. Men who abuse often claim that sermons preached in the Church support them in the right to misuse power and authority. They lay claim to all sorts of cultural assumptions about the meaning of (for example) 'headship' to justify what often amounts to criminal activity.

These reports are also brave enough to name the reality of the spiritual assault which comes as a direct result of sexual assault. They assert that traditional theology has maintained a monopoly on the meaning of 'spirituality'—relegating it to virtues, codes of prayer or rites of passage centred on the esoteric or 'other worldly', rejecting the body and God-created sexuality—especially female sexuality. It has defined acceptable sexuality (especially for females) as being submissive to an exclusively male God, restricted to stereotyped concepts of Father, Powerful Judge, Victor, Almighty, Omnipotent.

If our images of God are in the main *male*, the woman who has been raped or bashed, or the child abused by a father or father figure, may have no means of perceiving God as loving and protective of the innocent. Trusting her essential, spiritual, psychological self to heal can be traumatic and almost untenable in the context of the Christian community.

It is the assertion of both reports that theology follows or arises from life experience. It does not precede it, nor is it imposed artificially on it. God does not control each specific event. God does not push us around. Thus the work of Project Anna draws heavily from the stories of women in an attempt to articulate the complex spiritual and theological consequences of sexual assault and family violence. And these women who are victims of violence confirm that the integral relationship of body and spirit is what makes us fully human.

Any form of violence is always spiritually destructive. It threatens self-respect and mutual trust, giving rise to feelings of personal and social powerlessness. Violence destroys our human capacity to create and transform community, both interpersonal and political. If a blanket of silence exists then violence breeds and our innate spiritual capacity to envisage a course of action and alternative future is paralysed.

Our call, therefore, as workers committed to ending violence, is to courageously take up developmental processes of conversion from a systemic abuse of power through patriarchy to a more equitable and mutual journey. There is no doubt that the old tyranny of violence can be broken through truth telling, and deeper systemic changes can occur which will empower and authorise all rather than a few. These alternative models of power can be explored and experienced in our institutions, heralding change throughout our public and private lives.

The development, publishing and outcomes of both the *Pastoral Report* and *Hearing Voices*, and the continuing work of Project Anna affirms to us that the Church can play a key role in this movement against violence. Our research into sexual and family violence in the Church community is based on the process of self-examination by the Church community with its capacity to acknowledge structural complicity and to initiate recommendations for change and healing. *We are breaking the silence.*

References

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