

Family Violence: Breaking the Silence

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The family is the place for receiving warmth, compassion, nurture, respect and dignity. However, ever since Cain killed Abel, for far too many people, the family has been one of the most violent institutions in society.

As much as it is a place for loving support, the family is also a place of great abuse and violence. For many it is a dangerous place. More than anywhere else in society, it is the site of murder, child abuse, and assault. In her book, *Understanding Wife Assault*, Deborah Sinclair writes:

"Two-fifths of all homicides in Canada are between spouses. The vast majority of the victims are women. Those women who do kill their partners are usually acting in self-defense."

Violence in the family is a wide-spread reality — even in Christian families. It knows no boundaries. The violence hurts women, men, and children of every age, race and religion, and of every socio-economic level. Yet it remains hidden, occurring in the privacy of the family and the home, an environment we normally think of as a safe place in which to live and grow. Unless the injuries are so severe they cannot be hidden, the dimensions of this problem often remain unseen and unchallenged.

Family violence is very hard to talk about. It is complex. It is painful. It takes us into the intimate and vulnerable area of relationships.

WHAT IS FAMILY VIOLENCE?

Family violence is any form of abusive behaviour that violates the dignity and respect of the persons young and old who are part of the family unit. It can include physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, social and financial abuse or neglect. And the mental and emotional wounds can go on bleeding long after the physical injuries have healed.

Generally, wife assault, child abuse and elder abuse are the broad categories used to describe the most common aspects of family violence.

Wife abuse is lethal soul-destroying subordination. It can be physical, psychological, verbal, sexual or economic. Battered women are hit, beaten, punched, burned, kicked, shot, knifed. They have their hair pulled out of their heads. They have ribs and bones broken. A few have eyes pulled out of their sockets. Some are pushed down stairs, have boiling water poured on them. Many suffer permanent hearing loss as a result of repeated blows to their ears and heads.

No woman ever deserves to be beaten, regardless of the kind of person she is.

Child abuse refers to the physical, psychological, social, emotional, and sexual abuse of a child whereby the survival, safety, self esteem, growth and development of the person are endangered or thriving. When a child witnesses violent acts against other family members the damage is equally profound.

In her book, *My Father's House*, Sylvia Fraser conveys the thoughts of an abused child:

"My other self lies on her daddy's bed, her arms glued to her sides, her legs numb. For the first time, penetration is attempted, though it is by no means completed. She feels as if she were being repeatedly punched in the belly, forcing all air from her lungs. She feels used, not as one person exploited by another, but as a condom is used then discarded in the gutter. Tears run backward down her face into her hair. The emotion she holds so tightly in her chest that it blocks everything else is grief. She is old enough, now, to know about blood and babies. She is old enough, now, to understand how completely she has been betrayed."

Elder abuse is the refusal or failure to care for the older person whether intentional or unintentional. It may include the infliction of physical injury, restraint, financial exploitation, threats, ridicule, insult or humiliation, forced isolation, or forced change in living arrangement.

Elder abuse can take place in the home, in the community, in institutions. Studies indicate that there may be almost as much abuse of older persons as there is abuse of children.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

The problem of violence in the family is more than a simple matter of a few scattered individuals who need techniques for anger control and sex therapy. It is embedded in a culture which, we know for a fact, has tolerated incest, child abuse and wife battering for years and years.

Victims of family violence find themselves prisoners in their own homes, dominated, exploited, and abused by someone they know and love, and often they are afraid to speak to someone about it.

Historically, the church has reacted to domestic violence in the same way the family has — denial and coverup. But it has become clear that these responses are inadequate. The problem is too large and the pain too extensive to be ignored. We must act both to prevent the problem and to heal those involved.

What then do we, in the church, need to do?

We need to challenge our present mindsets so that we can move together in greater solidarity and compassion to respond to family violence in new ways. We must refuse to permit one another to ignore and deny the problems, personally or publicly.

We must open ourselves to deeper understandings of the roots and causes of violence.

We need to give expression to the hurt in Canadian families and to seek ways to make that hurt more speakable. We must commit ourselves to attend to the pain in our communities and to begin a process of healing.

A HEALING COMMUNITY

How does the love of Christ grapple with a problem so real and devastating as family violence?

Victims and offenders are agonizing with the pain and guilt of their broken lives. Condescension and judgement toward them are beneath the grace of Christ. Shallow promises of healing are not enough. Concrete help will only come as we are willing to wrestle with the realities and consequences of sinful humanity.

One of the pressing needs our churches face is to create a climate in which these people can reveal their need and find help. In his book, *Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness*, Jerry Cook writes:

"When love, acceptance and forgiveness characterize our lives and our churches, the Lord will send us people who need to be made whole."

Cultivating a healing atmosphere in our churches is the place to begin. Some of the elements that promote this atmosphere are:

1. A growing understanding of God's unconditional love;
2. A strong emphasis upon God's grace and mercy;
3. A non-critical, non-judgemental attitude;
4. An awareness of sin's impact;
5. An availability to God's leading.

How does a church develop a helping program for the victims and abusers of domestic violence?

Of prime importance is the practical instruction from the pulpit. Words spoken from the pulpit usually set the tone for the attitudes and actions of the entire congregation. Prayers offered for the broken and hurting families in the community will foster a compassionate people.

A good church emphasis should include practical teaching at all levels. Sunday School elective courses, film lectures, or special seminars can be utilized to maintain awareness among adults. Children need to be taught to respect their elders, but they also need to be instructed when to say no. If children do not learn to say no to protect themselves from sexual abuse, we all are the losers.

The entire church must be willing to come to the aid of those families involved in abuse. It may mean many things from providing foster care or living space for individuals who are displaced by legal restraints to providing financial assistance to families or paying for counseling services not covered by insurance programs.

There is no simple solution or procedure that guarantees results. But there is nothing more exciting than to see a church respond to human needs; it is wonderful to see God's people reaching out with love and understanding. It is a clear example of answering the challenge of John 13:34,35:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."