

POLICY STATEMENT *of The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America* 475 Riverside Drive, New York, New York 10115

FAMILY VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

Adopted by the General Board
November 14, 1990

Introduction

Family violence is aggression perpetrated against the most vulnerable persons in a family. Although men can also be victims, its most common victims are women, children, the elderly and the disabled.

Family violence is a violation of the inherent integrity of a person; it may include physical and/or psychological assault, battering, marital rape, incest, and destruction of property.

Other expressions of family violence are neglect of the physical and emotional needs of dependent adults or children; for example withholding of prescribed medical care or the continuous withholding of affection and affirmation.

Family violence is a common experience for adults and children of every race, class, and religious affiliation; it occurs in every type of family configuration. There is violence within families, between partners, between siblings, from parents to children, and from older children to parents.

The prevalence of violence and abuse within the family is well-documented. Statistics from reported cases of sexual abuse and research indicate that:

- At least one in three females,¹ and one in eleven males,² are sexually abused before they reach the age of eighteen.
- Nine out of ten cases of child sexual abuse are perpetrated by someone known to and trusted by the child, usually a family member, family friend, neighbor, teacher or pastor.³
- Fourteen percent (14%) of married women report rape by their husbands.⁴
- In the United States one case of physical spouse assault is reported to police every sixty seconds.⁵
- Two thousand children die each year of physical abuse or neglect.⁶
- Physical and emotional abuse of aging parents by family members is a serious and growing problem.

Family violence is both the cause and the result of some of society's most unrelenting social problems: teenage pregnancies, prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, eating disorders, and violent criminal behavior. Family violence is an issue of critical concern to our society because it is so widespread and is literally destroying family life. The cost to our community is enormous: increased use of law enforcement and judicial processes, increased need for medical care, and loss of employee work time. Even more costly is the damage to the social fabric itself when people no longer feel safe within their own families.

National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Social Context

Family violence is an epidemic in Western, post-industrial societies. It is the common lot of many women and children, and is expected and accepted by many as "just the way things are." Women and children are the most likely victims of abuse because they are the most vulnerable of family members. Throughout history they have been the most vulnerable because of the socialization and circumstance of being in male-dominated societies. The customs, doctrines, legal mandates, and even interpretations of scripture in such male-dominated societies have granted to males the "prerogative" to decide for others, to control others, to place demands on others, and to chastise. It gives the power to presume that females were created to serve the needs of men and gives the power to punish them when they do not. The persistence of this "prerogative" compounds the problem of family violence. Many husbands still assume that they have the right to discipline their wives, the right to coerce sexual activity as well as the right to control their wives' activities and personal expression. This "prerogative" is assumed as a birthright and serves to justify, or, without question, condone some men's behavior toward women.

Legal Context

The weight of socially acceptable behavior is often to be found in the laws that a people construct. These laws may be maintained without concern for the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, with justice and freedom for all.

Nevertheless, law continues to come under humane review, and the church needs to join forces with those who advocate the overturning of those laws which discriminate against women victims of spousal abuse, or against the young who are sexually or otherwise physically abused.

~~There continue to be harsh judgments against women who kill the spouses who batter them. Too often the sentencing of these women is as severe as if there were no mitigating circumstances.⁷~~

There is need for support for universal legislation which would mandate that victims be notified when their assailants are being released from prison, even for weekend release, and for support by setting higher bail when family violence is involved.

There is also need for judicial review and censure against any police officers or judges who "make light of" or otherwise demonstrate indifference to requests for protection against violence.⁸

There is also an assumption among many adults in society and in the church that children have few or no rights. Adults within a family setting, both male and female, frequently act on the assumption that they have a mandate to harshly discipline and control children in an atmosphere of verbal or non-verbal coercion. The cycle of adult violence and power thus widens to include the abuse of those who are most vulnerable: the children.

To fully comprehend the roots of family violence within society, we must look squarely at the deep concerns of sexism, racism, ageism, and classism. In a situation of systemic disempowerment we can understand why violence is often chosen by abusers to sustain or gain power and perceived "privilege," and why women, children and the elderly are likely targets of abuse.

Ecclesial Context

The Attorney General's Task Force on Family Violence, in its final report, stated:

Therefore, we see that historical beliefs, attitudes, and practices on the part of church leadership have contributed to victimization of the most vulnerable persons in families. The circumstances cited by law enforcement and other secular agents indicate that members of faith communions are not exempt from the victimization or perpetration of abuse.⁹

Christians bear a heavy weight of responsibility for the patterns of relationships and social environment, based upon Christian teachings through the ages, that give rise to family violence. As churches, we must acknowledge the ways in which interpretations of the Christian faith have contributed to violence against women and children, and the ways in which the actions of some religious leaders have contributed to the problem. There has been profound silence throughout the centuries in the face of men's injustice toward women, and unconcern about abusive treatment of children within the family setting. Some moral theologies have excused or ignored wife and child abuse. The churches' representatives all too often have been poorly equipped to minister to the suffering of women and children. Too often there has been an indifference or an inability to hold abusers accountable for their actions. In sum, inaction by church leadership has sustained the injustice of family violence.

If Christians are to act with justice, we must acknowledge and act in repentance for the instances of abuse which have been committed by our own, and we must confess our sin of silence which for too long has prevailed in the midst of family abuse.¹⁰

Cleansed by repentance, the churches' representatives must then be prepared to act, to minister in Christ's name with those who have been beaten, molested, raped, and terrorized by members of their own families. The church must be willing to call to account those persons and institutions which perpetuate harm to others. The church needs to be empowered with courage and confidence to be both the Good Samaritan who ministers to those in need, as well as the Prophet who seeks justice.

Scriptural Base for Involvement of the Church

While Christian scripture does not address family violence per se, it does portray clearly a concern for those who were

vulnerable to victimization at the hands of others. The hospitality code of the Hebraic tradition required that those who were most vulnerable be given protection.

"Learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Isa. 1:17. (See also: Deut. 10:18; Job 22:9; Psalm 82:3-4; and Ezekiel 34.)

This code, coupled with the understanding of the law concerning sojourners, instructs us regarding our responsibility toward women and children fleeing homes where they have experienced abuse: "If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry." (Exodus 22:23.)

Jesus' concern for those who are victimized is seen in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37). His use of this story as a teaching moment sets a clear directive, "Go and do likewise," indicating that all persons who are weak and vulnerable are to receive, not violence and abuse, but compassion and caring.

It is not accidental that in Jesus' parable it was religious leaders who failed to assist the assault victim in the parable. Even though a legalistic duty was met, it is evident that we are being challenged to go beyond the letter of the law.

Jesus' own ministry points toward some of these very concerns. The parable of the judge who vindicated a widow against her adversary (Luke 18:1- 8) shows how women have had to persist against unjust institutions. Jesus' approach to those involved with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11) illustrates the double standard (then as now) of harshly judging women without holding men culpable as well.

At the same time it must be noted that some passages of scripture have been misappropriated in support of acts of violence against women. Domestic violence in the form of spousal abuse (Hos. 2:3) and spousal rape (Jer. 13: 25-26) appear as metaphors of divine judgment/punishment. In preaching and teaching it must be emphasized that they are metaphors, that they come out of a different time and culture, and that they must not at any time be used to sanction spousal abuse. Nor can it be accepted that Eph. 5: 22, "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord," be sanctioned as scriptural base for abuse or coercion. Jesus' teaching that judgment awaits those who cause or allow harm to children, his concern for women and other victims of violence, and the Hebraic hospitality code which required the protection of those most vulnerable, make clear the mandate of the Christian teaching: persons, be they adults or children, are not to be harmed but are to be protected by the whole community, even from the suffering of family violence.

Psychological Context

The victims of family violence suffer the psychological trauma of a life-threatening experience and an invasion of self resulting in fear and confusion. Being victimized at the hands of a loved one is a betrayal of the most basic of relationships, a betrayal which brings about the destruction of trust and intimacy. Recovery is often a long process, and is frequently confounded by the revictimization which results from the "blaming-the-victim" response which comes from family, friends, representatives of the church, or society at large.

The trauma of family violence is profound whether the victimization of the child is a one-time molestation by a stranger or a chronic pattern of abuse or neglect in the family which lasts for years. The long-term consequences of incestuous abuse for the adult survivor may include fear of intimacy,

difficulty in relationship, sexual dysfunction, chemical dependency, and the possibility of repeating the same behavior with others.

On the other hand, psychologically, the abuser does not fit the regular profile. While the majority of abusers are male, there are also female offenders who physically and/or sexually abuse children. Their acts of violence and aggression are primarily motivated by a desire to dominate and control others. Many offenders have a previous history of childhood victimization. Thus a pattern of abuse persists across generations.

Pastoral Context

Ways in which the teachings of the faith have contributed to the problem frequently compound the traumas of family violence. A child who is being sexually abused by a parent can easily be spiritually alienated and confused by the concept of God as "Father," or the admonition to "honor your father and mother."

Adult female victims who have believed the promise of the church that Christian marriage is "till death do us part," and that God would protect them from all harm, may well experience a severe crisis of faith. This can be compounded by a pastor who counsels them to remain in abusive relationships, "be a better wife," simply "turn to God in prayer," or accept their circumstances as part of God's will.

The victim of violence, abuse or neglect, who feels obligated by scriptural instruction to "forgive those who harm you" but who does not forgive, feels guilty and alone.

The incest offender who might "find Jesus" and then claim to need treatment does not comprehend the full meaning of repentance.

because of the breadth and depth of the harm caused by

family violence and because of the mandates of the faith," the church is called to both a pastoral and a prophetic (justice) response to this epidemic problem.

Implications for Involvement by the NCC and its Member Communion

The church is challenged to obtain information and guidance which will lead to a deeper understanding of appropriate ways to minister with families who are experiencing sexual or domestic violence. It is challenged to commit human and financial resources to this effort.

As a community of communions the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. affirms the sacredness of persons and their right to safety and care in familial relationships as fundamental to our understanding of well-being within the community.

We urge one another to foster situations in which the signs of family violence can be named, and appropriate responses can be made.

We urge one another to include in our programming and training, specific resources that will equip church personnel at every level to respond with justice and compassion to the presence of family violence among our membership and within the community at large.

Such responses should encompass every aspect of the communal life of the church, from proclaiming the Word of pastoral care, to compassionate action and advocacy on behalf of the vulnerable and the powerless, to religious education of adults and children. Only through such shared commitment to a pastoral, prophetic, and preventive response can individuals and families affected by family violence experience the church as the presence of God's loving care in the midst of crisis.

ADDENDUM TO THE POLICY: SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

The following suggestions are given as ways of implementing action through the national, regional, and local church:

1. Speak out clearly and unequivocally in a context of justice-making, naming as sin family violence;
2. Provide to clergy and lay members educational and training resources which address family violence, abuse and neglect;
3. Encourage clergy and lay leaders to work cooperatively with specialized community resources to provide for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of victims, offenders, and other family members;
4. Encourage clergy and lay counselors to use child protective services in each state as a resource through which to protect children and vulnerable adults;
5. Support community interventions which protect victims, hold offenders accountable for the offense, provide where appropriate incarceration and treatment for offenders, and provide support for other family members;
6. Urge support of denominational, ecumenical, interfaith, and public policy initiatives which will bring community resources to bear in response to and prevention of these and related problems. These related problems include the increasing incidents of the phenomena of "date rape," as well as the unethical betrayal of trust and sexual victimization of clients, women and children by such therapeutic "mentors" as pastors, physicians, and counselors of different kinds in institutions of both church and society;
7. Encourage denominations to provide educational and supportive (respite) programs and resources for families which care for dependent older adults;
8. Oppose decriminalization of child sexual abuse offenses;
9. Encourage denominational use of resources in prevention education with children and teenagers;
10. Address the needs of victims of battering who have been incarcerated because they have defended themselves against their abuse; use prison chaplaincies as a resource to seek justice for these persons;
11. Continue to support ecumenical and denominational programming in human sexuality education for all ages through local churches;
12. Support research into the relationships between family violence and social issues such as drug and alcohol abuse and pornography;
13. Encourage denominations to provide guidelines and training which address the prevention of child sexual abuse in child care programs sponsored by local churches;
14. Encourage denominations to develop pastoral care materials which address the spiritual and religious needs of victims who are in the midst of crisis;

15. Encourage seminaries to integrate information about family violence and abuse into their curricula so as to better prepare ministers to recognize and respond to this problem;
16. Continue to advocate reform of the criminal justice system, in order to insure accountability for crimes of family violence and to guarantee appropriate rehabilitative treatment for offenders;
17. Encourage member communions to re-examine the scriptural, theological, and traditional assumptions which may restrict the acceptance, contribution, and vocation of women in their ecclesiastical structures and may thereby offer unintended support for a patriarchal view of women as subordinate to men, the base upon which much abuse toward women and children is built; and
18. Urge communions, working with local congregations, to create and implement programs which address the problems of family violence, abuse and neglect in such a way as to prevent their further occurrence, especially as these problems occur within the context of church-supported programs and services.

NOTES

¹ Diana Russell, "The Incidence and Prevalence of Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Sexual Abuse of Female Children," *Child Abuse and Neglect: The International Journal*, October, 1982.

² David Finkelhor, *Sexually Victimized Children* (New York: The Freepress, 1979).

³ Sexual Assault Center, Harborview Medical Center, Seattle, WA, 1983.

⁴ Diana Russell, *Rape in Marriage* (New York: Macmillan, 1982).

⁵ FBI, quoted in *Verified Domestic Violence Statistics* (Western Center on Domestic Violence, 1984).

⁶ Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 1984.

⁷ Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill* (New York: Freepress, 1987).

⁸ *The N.Y. Daily News*, Sept. 3, 1989, "Orders of Illusion," documents the absence of legal protection against "self-proclaimed assailants."

⁹ Attorney General's Task Force on Family Violence, *Final Report*, September, 1984. United States Department of Justice.

¹⁰ *A Violence Against Women: The Report of the General Synod*, 1986. Anglican Church of Canada. pp. 37-39.

¹¹ The phrase "mandates of faith" refers to those aspects of our scripture and tradition that call us to justice, to support of the vulnerable, to hospitality, to sanctuary; all of the dimensions of the faith which basically call us to ministry with and for persons who have been abused.

VOTE

Yes: 141; No: 3; Abstention: 1.