COVER FEATURE

Victim to their charms

It's a painful truth but we've got to face it: domestic abuse happens in every corner of society, including ours, writes Anne Lim.

HE UNTHINKABLE HAPPENED THIS YEAR IN THE NATIONAL DEBATE ON DOMESTIC violence. Amid the eloquent advocacy of Rosie Batty, whose son was killed by his father, a light was shone on the confronting reality that domestic violence reaches into all levels of society, even into the homes of Sydney Anglican families.

Moreover, disturbing suggestions were made that biblical ideas on male headship and female submission in marriage could be serving as an enabling mechanism for domestic violence and that abused women were being counselled by clergy to stay in unsafe situations. Writing in *The Sydney Morning Herald* under a pen name, Isabella Young* castigated Christian leaders

for disbelieving that domestic violence was a problem in the Anglican Church. She was upset by the reactions of a theologian and a minister, who had publicly questioned the suggestion in a column by journalist Julia Baird that teaching on the doctrine of male headship and female submission could be creating an environment in which domestic violence could flourish. Isabella's article detailing the psychological torture she had endured from her ex-husband, a seemingly godly Christian and Bible study leader, blew apart the assumption that church marriages

were somehow immune to so-called intimate partner abuse. "I wrote that article because I was angry with the two responses that I read in relation to Julia's article, which were 'How dare someone accuse us as Christians of behaving like this and accuse ministers of allowing things like this to go on?' " she recalls.

"I didn't think anyone else would have the insight, especially into the abuse of Scripture aspects of the Church. I don't think many of the ministers in Sydney were realising the extent to which it was happening. [They didn't understand how] if they weren't saying anything well nuanced about submission and divorce, that could be used for evil."

Twisted principles

Amy Cheng* was just 21 when she married a seemingly gentle and kind man she had met at a church in Sydney. They moved cities and for the next two years Amy experienced slowly escalating violence of a subtle but undermining nature which left her questioning reality.

About three weeks after they got back from their honeymoon, her new husband announced he didn't want to be married to her any more. About six months in, he was diagnosed with depression and began to use that as an excuse for his lack of caring and understanding.

"I knew something was wrong but I thought 'I'll stick it out, it'll get better'," she says. "And it slowly got worse. It was quite insidious. Then by about one year he started to get out of control in his rage and he was smashing wedding photos and throwing keys at windows and throwing chairs through walls and breaking things.

"There was quite a lot of jealousy and quite a lot of 'I want to control you'. I'm quite a hard person to control and so a failure to be able to control me would spark rage.

"A recurring thing for him was, 'I need to make you submit. It's my job to clip your wings'. My theology was not like that and I went, 'It's not your job to make me submit – it's my job to choose to submit. It's your job to love me'."

Amy had medical issues that made sex painful and had surgery to try and fix the problem, which was unsuccessful. "About 18 months in, he got very demanding around that area and I started to check out during anything physical because I felt like I was being raped in some circumstances. It was consenting but in that way of, 'I know I should do this' as opposed to 'I actively want this'."

The violence escalated. One day, when they were out in the car, "he pulled up, opened my door, took off my seatbelt and pushed me out and drove away – just left me on the side of the road."

After a few more such episodes, Amy met up with an Anglican minister and his wife to discuss her situation.

"They were sweet and kind and well meaning but not equipped to deal with what was going on," she says.

"I didn't tell them exactly what was going on. Part of the problem of my experience with the church was I didn't reach out as fully as they would have needed me to, to realise exactly what was going on. And often from the outside the person who's doing the abusing looks charming and the person who's not looks demanding. It looked like I was being the bossy wife, putting a lot of pressure on him. From the outside it didn't look like what it looked like on the inside."

She then called the Domestic Violence Hotline to find out if what she was experiencing was domestic violence, even though she didn't have a black eye or a broken nose. experiencing it'. In some ways it was a relief, in some ways it was terrifying. "But I just n e e d e d somebody to say, 'Yes, you're right, your



suspicions are correct'... nobody in the church had been able to say that for me."

The marriage finally broke down during an overseas holiday. Amy received a message from a friend who had been diagnosed with cancer and had been given four to eight months to live. "I was very upset and burst into tears. My ex said, 'What's wrong?' I showed him the message and he just threw the phone at me and said, 'If you love him so much we should get a divorce and you should marry him'."

As soon as they got home, her husband left her, "but not before he told my dad I'd been having an affair. The whole thing was ludicrous".

Three years on and now a student in Sydney, Amy believes the things that attracted her to her ex were not real. "He paid me a lot of attention and told me I was lovely and he really wanted to be with me. He wanted to be serious. I just thought marriage is what you do."

She recalls that at the church where she met her ex-husband there was a culture of believing that if you were still unmarried at 22 you were on the shelf. "We got engaged within eight months of dating but because we were in this circle of people who were doing that nobody blinked an eye," she says.

"I don't know if it would have happened to me if I'd been outside the Christian circles because you don't date, you intentionally court, so from the word go you're talking about getting married."

Amy says she is telling her story because "there is a fundamental lack of understanding about domestic violence and I'm really hoping that the church will step up and educate itself a bit more".

She says ministers need to be able to recognise the signs of domestic abuse when a woman comes to them. "I went to ministers and said, 'I'm scared to go home' or 'He can't control his anger'. There are phrases that people use that aren't flat-out 'I am being abused'."

Amy says people also need to know the things not to say, such as 'Are you sure?' – "If they are coming to you, they are sure."

She believes teaching on submission needs to include a caveat that wives do not need to submit if their husbands are behaving in a way that is not based on love, and they can reach out for help.

"Ithought, 'Is this really happening? I'm educated and I come from a church family and he comes from a church family and I'm not who I think this happens to'. And the woman on the other end of the line said, 'If you're feeling unsafe and these things are happening then, yes, you are "One of the things I learnt is there are principles in the Bible that are beautiful in a marriage that has two people who are not perfect and are working at it, but they are principles that get really badly distorted in an abusive relationship where one of you is just twisting it," she says. "Then it becomes very dangerous."

With the issue suddenly brought to national prominence, Christian leaders took their stands. The Rev Dr John Dickson and Dr Natasha Moore of the Centre for Public Christianity called for an independent survey to gauge the prevalence of domestic violence in our churches and clergy responses to it.

The Rev Nigel Fortescue, senior minister at Campbelltown Anglican Church, went further, calling for urgent action at the grassroots to address "the erroneous teaching of some pastors".

"Having acknowledged that some pastors have taught and encouraged people to stay in abusive relationships, we pastors must get talking among ourselves," he wrote in a blog post. "Ask each other what we think. Share ideas for how to teach, rebuke, when it comes to their marriages. Challenge each other if you hear that someone has their teaching on marriage warped. Rebuke each other and prepare to married person to stay in a violent relationship."

He also urged pastors to ask more pointed and penetrating questions of people about their marriages, including sex, violence and finances.

Then in June the Standing Committee of the Sydney Anglican Diocese voted to set up a taskforce to interview victims and develop a policy statement along with advice for good pastoral practice. Importantly, the taskforce is not just in-house. It includes a professional counsellor; the Rev Canon Sandy Grant, the senior minister at St Michael's Cathedral, Wollongong; a chaplain; and the Archdeacon for Women, Kara Hartley. It has been given a modest amount of funding from contingencies to fly in victims from interstate.

The training institutions are to report to Synod in October on the steps they have taken in policy areas related to domestic violence such as including educational material in their curriculums. Moore College already runs a module on domestic violence for first- and third-year students. The college has recently put a domestic violence policy on its website.

"The goal is to have this policy known among the student body and spouses of students," says Dr Keith Condie, the dean of students. "We are also planning training for faculty and chaplains working at the college."

For Sandy Grant, it is the culmination of two years of energetic advocacy. In 2013 he proposed a resolution in Synod calling for greater education of clergy in dealing with domestic violence, which was passed unanimously. It also asked Moore College and the in-service training group, Ministry for Training and Development, to beef up their training in this area.

Abuse from a clergy husband

The story of Karen Patterson* demonstrates how the victim of domestic abuse can be victimised by her own church. Her lengthy abusive marriage to an Anglican minister also serves to show the lasting damage that verbal, emotional, financial and sexual abuse can inflict.

Karen was driven to contemplating suicide while under the thumb of her husband and still has regular counselling for a major depressive disorder.

While Karen's husband never physically abused her, but he demanded that she obey him in everything, especially in the bedroom. She was told she was a bad wife because she wouldn't submit to his sexual fantasies.

"He would constantly remind me that the word 'obey' was in our marriage service and it was my duty to obey him in all things," she says.

"He would constantly accuse me of being 'unfaithful' whereas it was him who was – there are many women who have fallen victim to his charms."

He kept tabs on her movements and there was an endless catalogue of petty rules. "If we had bottles of lemonade or soft drink in the fridge I had to ask his permission to drink it," she says.

"Chocolate and other confectionery were given out bit by bit according to his wishes. I was never allowed to pick vegetables out of the garden as I was 'doing it wrong'.

"Weekly housekeeping money was given to me a note at a time, counted out onto the dining room table – if I needed more I was asked to [nominate] a specific amount; any excess not used was to be returned to him.

"Whatever went wrong or was not to his liking was perceived as my fault. I didn't do or say the right things. My opinions or views were not important, let alone valued, to the point where I would just agree to everything to keep the peace to make life easier for me and the children."

When the family moved interstate Karen went back to work, but the money went to their joint account and she wasn't allowed to touch it.

"After I had been in the job for about six months, it was his birthday and I spent the previous night cooking what he wanted for his birthday dinner," she recalls. "I went to work the next day, came home, prepared dinner for us all and then he said, 'Let's go for a walk'. On this walk he said that unless I was prepared to give in to his sexual demands in all their forms, the marriage was over. "Apart from the fact that I was furious that I had gone to all this trouble for his birthday while working full-time, he was giving me an ultimatum.



"For a brief few seconds I had a moment of clarity and said, 'Well, the marriage is over then as I am not prepared to give you want you want'. I think it shocked him as previously I had done what I was told – I hadn't stood up to him since before we were married."

The next Sunday her husband announced their separation from the pulpit. "As we lived in a church house, I had to be the one who left – which was interpreted by many in our church as me 'leaving' so therefore the break-up was my fault," she says.

"During this time the best support I got was from non-Christians and people outside the church."

After the split, the financial abuse continued as Karen got none of the money from their joint savings and was unable to obtain regular child support for their children.

"In the end, even after divorce, I was getting about \$30 a month for our son, when he paid it," she says. "All the while he was off on overseas holidays about twice a year, and a new car every two years."

When the marriage broke up, the bishop of the diocese sent Karen to a psychologist for counselling. But he did not arrange for her husband to see a psychologist.

When her husband's harassing behaviour continued after the break-up, she appealed to the bishop, whose response was to send him to a parish a long distance away.

"The attitude of the hierarchy was it was my fault. It was insinuated I was being vengeful, vindictive and difficult," she says.

"I didn't go to church for a long time – I was disillusioned and hurting and only getting accusations from many within the Church. "Even in the darkest days, I never felt that God

had deserted me, only the Church. "Ialso attend a great Pentecostal church now – far

removed from the rituals of the Anglican Church and the patriarchal system it encompasses."

Isabella was overwhelmed by a flood of emails from domestic abuse victims in response to her article. She stopped counting when her respondents reached 100. Some of these women, including two wives of clergymen, contacted *Southern Cross* and agreed to tell their stories under pen names. However, the shame of being a domestic abuse victim, which is even greater for a man, may have been what kept any Anglican men from contacting *Southern Cross*.

While physical violence was present in two cases, the predominant abuse reported by the six female and two male victims was threats, verbal abuse, financial abuse, isolation and other emotional or psychological manipulation.

In a pattern of behaviour well known by psychologists, the men would woo their wives with charm, chivalry, flattering attention and a winning need to commit, then after marriage would drop the mask and make it their job to control and undermine their wives. In most cases, wives were told it was their duty to submit and were subjected to unpredictable rages when they stepped out of line, leaving them walking on eggshells and afraid to go home.

To add to the problem, the humiliation of naming their spouse's behaviour as domestic violence kept many from seeking help. "Admitting that to yourself is really shameful because then you become like someone from an

episode of *The Bill* who has a druggie boyfriend who's bashing you up," Isabella says. "There are a whole heap of pride emotions, particularly if you've been to university, you have a decent job and you think you should be able not to get sucked in by people like that."

Isabella's husband bombarded her with quotations from the Bible about nagging wives and her duty to submit, while isolating her from her parents and friends and controlling her every move. Once he even dragged her by the hair upstairs after she spent longer than she was supposed to on the phone to her mother.

"There's no way I would have dared nag him," she says. "Any signs of normal frustration are interpreted as insurrection and insubordination and have to be dealt with... It's like the girl scout; you always have to be ready for the next attack."

With her love and fear intertwined, Isabella describes her marriage as like a two-person cult, with a leader exposing a follower to warped Christian-type teaching. "There is a great deal of captive-bonding Stockholm Syndrome going on," she says. "It's not an adult-adult relationship; it's a master-servant, parent-child relationship."

After feeling like a hamster on a wheel, Isabella finally found the courage to escape when she confided in someone she met at a church dinner.

"In the car on the way home, I told someone and she said, 'You cannot go back there'. Next day I packed and got out of there. She went and told the minister, who was very supportive. Then after a few weeks when my husband realised I had told a few people apart from the minister, he scarpered." The fact that Isabella's husband fled the congregation made it safe for her to continue attending the

same church, where "pretty much everyone who knew what had happened was incredibly supportive". However, not every abused spouse receives appropriate protection or support. "A woman is told, with bad theology, that if she submits and tries harder then it will stop happening

whereas if you're a bloke, if you could control the little wifey then this wouldn't happen," Isabella says. "Of course, both those things are wrong."

A man's perspective

For Chris Fitzgerald*, one of the hardest things he faced as a victim of domestic abuse was not being heard or believed. Chris's story shows that being a male victim of female spousal abuse is not acceptable in our society.

When he rang the Domestic Violence Hotline he was told, "Chris, I don't believe you were abused because only men abuse women".

While he was telling a marriage counsellor what was going on, his wife would "just cry and say, 'He's making it all up, it's all lies'. On the way home she'd say, 'No one's going to believe you. They believe me'."

When he sought individual counselling, the caseworker told him the only option was an anger management course. "I said, 'Hang on, I was spat on, I was punched in the head, I was bitten, I was verbally abused, emotionally abused, spiritually abused, and I have to do an anger management course?' She said, 'Yes, that's the only program we have for men to do'."

Chris's marriage went off the rails almost a decade ago after he collapsed with a lifethreatening illness and was hospitalised for weeks. Until then he had his own business, and had been busy and fit. But during rehab he had to learn to walk and talk again and had very little energy.

"I was supposed to get a shower chair and on the way home from hospital my wife said, 'A real man doesn't sit down in the shower, he stands up – we're not getting you a shower chair'. So began the onslaught of getting told all the time that I wasn't a real man," Chris recalls.

"I'd only been home for three or four days and I said, 'Can I have some money to get the boys some Christmas presents?' She said, 'No, a real man would be out earning his own money instead of begging his wife for some and lying flat on his back and being a lazy x-y-z doing nothing for two months'.

"Where do you go when you get a comment like that? I just said to God, 'What do I do with this?' When we were out shopping I was in a wheelchair and a fellow from church came up and gave me \$100 and that was a beautiful thing, just knowing God was there. When I told my wife she said, 'You've got to give me that, you don't deserve money'."

His wife would come into the bathroom while he was having a shower and mock him as he hoisted himself up from the shower floor by hanging onto the toilet seat. "She would laugh and say: 'Look at you, you might have the doctors convinced there's something wrong with you, but I know better. I'm going to get you out working whether you want to or not, you lazy so-and-so'."

After refusing Chris money to finish building

a shelf for a friend, she spat on him and said: "I'm disgusted with you, you promise someone that you would build

them a shelf



and you're not a man of your word'. I said, 'I only need about \$40 of materials and it's done'. She said, 'No, you go and be a man and earn your own money'. In all our years of marriage my wife hadn't worked until I got sick and collapsed."

As his wife's violence escalated to punching him in the head, she sought to get him banned from church. One day she stood up in church and told everyone her husband was a backslider, that he was possessed by the devil and didn't want anything to do with anyone at church.

"Slowly I was being ostracised from friends," he says. "I was constantly told that I was mentally ill, that there was nothing wrong with me, it's all a mental thing. You get isolated from your family and friends and you start taking a lot of that stuff on board and you get depressed.

"One day she was in the kitchen cooking and she was sharpening kitchen knives and she said, 'One of these days I'm going to stab you'."

On one occasion Chris's wife bit him on the wrist to the bone. "I pushed her away and she hit her head on the couch. That's the first time I had touched her in any way to defend myself." She called the police, who wanted to arrest her rather than Chris. "I made a really stupid decision, I said, 'I don't really want her arrested'."

Coming to realise that he had to separate from his wife was one of the hardest things Chris ever did. "I just said to God, 'I can't do this any more'. You're told God hates divorce but I got to a point

where I said, 'I don't believe God wants me to go back to an unrepentant person who is so evil'." After the biting incident, Chris left the house and lived in the back of his van for three months.

When he did get a place of his own, his two children would visit every second weekend. "Father's Day wasn't on my weekend and she told

me I couldn't have the kids that weekend. But on the day she got them ready and said 'Dad's going to pick you up at 10.30'. And the following weekend they said, 'Dad, how come you didn't pick us up last week?' I had no knowledge she had got them ready."

Chris is convinced his wife was trying to push him to commit suicide and she almost succeeded. "One weekend, one of the kids had made a mess in their undies and I didn't return the undies because I had washed them. And she rang me up and abused me for being

Sandy Grant still feels sad he was unable to help a woman in a former parish who stayed in an unsafe place for much longer than was wise. She believed her wedding vows before God meant she could not leave her husband and move herself and her children to safety. He candidly says it was this sense of failure in his pastoral role that drove him to spearhead calls for a diocesan domestic abuse policy.

He believes clergy need to be trained "in how to be alert to the issue and then how to respond well to those who are caught up as victims of abuse, and from the point of the clergy person to recognise the complexity of their role.

"One, you're a pastoral carer but you may also be called on to be, in some sense, an investigator or an adjudicator. It's not always easy or even advisable for one person to be all things to [another] person at that point. So what's good practice in those circumstances?"

Isabella believes the Diocese should set up a set of protocols and resources to educate and support clergy. "We need a couple of people in the Professional Standards Unit who can help the poor rector when he has someone come to him and he doesn't know what to do," she says. "I'm pretty sure you would have a whole heap of rectors keeping them fully employed, either doing seminars or answering phone calls."

Grant believes clergy must not underestimate the problem of domestic violence or excuse it on the basis of biblical teaching on the sanctity of marriage.

"It's possible to use biblical teaching in a platitudinous way, as mere nostrums that excuse unacceptable behaviour and, in light of the sort of things that are being normalised in our society [such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*], I think we need to be teaching our youth as well."

Grant is a complementarian, which means he defends the theology of male headship and female submission in marriage, which has become counter-cultural in our society. "But it was pointed out to me by a Christian who took a different view that we haven't defended against the abuse of that teaching and I was convicted by that," he says. "I think we need to guard against the chauvinistic abuse of that teaching... and do more in preaching to guard against misunderstandings."

While Grant cannot recall hearing a single sermon in Anglican circles that told women they just had to submit in a situation of aggression and violence, he recognises that's not everyone's experience. Isabella believes ministers should preach on domestic abuse both as a topical sermon and woven into other sermons. She is gratified to see that ministers preaching on submission or forgiveness have started including a caveat on domestic violence, stressing the need for genuine repentance by perpetrators.

She has observed that many women feel trapped and even pushed to the verge of suicide by 1 Corinthians 7:11, which says if a wife separates from her husband she must remain unmarried. "I don't think you can be a safe parish if the ministers in the parish don't believe in divorce for domestic violence because the reason people kill themselves rather than stay in the situation is that they don't see any hope," she says. "It's all very well to say, 'Pray to God and he'll look after you'. But if your choice is between bringing up four children on your own with no money for the rest of your life, what do you think

they're going to do? It's preferable to stay and be bashed up and turn your children into the next generation of abusers than it is to leave with the hope that at some point it won't be this hard." It's a point vigorously taken up by several Sydney clergy, who believe a man has broken his marriage covenant by treating his wife abysmally.

"We have this idea that Jesus said only if you commit adultery can you get a divorce," says the Rev Steve Wakeford, rector of South Carlton. "But I don't reckon that's true at all. I reckon marital unfaithfulness is being unfaithful to the vows that you made at your wedding and that would include physical violence, emotional violence, spiritual violence.

"If you've got a girl in that situation getting terribly abused and mistreated and she comes to me and says she's being psychologically terrorised and says, 'I can't cope with it any more, it is OK to leave?' the answer is 'Yes'."

Wakeford says a lot of Christian men wrongly interpret submission as meaning their wife must do as they tell them.

"It doesn't mean that at all, so I wonder if we just haven't done a very good job of teaching that for probably a few generations," he says. "Or some blokes did a very good job of teaching it and unintentionally taught the wrong thing and then allowed other blokes to get away with all sorts of crazy stuff." As a police office for five years before he became a minister, Wakeford is alert to the signs of

domestic abuse that others may miss. "If I notice a woman come to church and she's wearing a bit more make-up than normal I will look

pretty closely at the make-up, and if she's got a couple of defensive wounds, if she's got scratches on her hands or her knuckles or the palm of her hand – the sort of stuff when someone puts their hands up to stop someone," he says.

"Also the kind of language [an abused] woman uses is very different to the language a woman who's safe at home uses. They'll be nervous about times, nervous about dinner, nervous about a whole bunch of things. A lot of people wouldn't realise but if you could train people to look out for it, it would probably change the way things go on."

He suggests clergy would benefit from lectures by a domestic violence liaison officer or Christian counsellor on how to recognise the signs of abuse.

"We need to do more from a church perspective to raise awareness of it and teach blokes to ask the right questions and look for the signs," he says.

"I also think we shouldn't be afraid to take this sort of stuff on. A pastor is like a shepherd. It's the hired hand who runs away from the wolf, the shepherd will stand and fight... But a lot of blokes are not like that, they don't know what to do and they put it in the too-hard basket. They don't want to cause a fuss."

Waking nightmare

For Jane Ellis*, the nightmare began in her mid-20s when she was assaulted regularly by Aaron, an outwardly godly but domineering member of her church who had aspirations to go into ministry.

"He would hit me, or kick me, or put my head in water so I couldn't breathe," she recalls. "He ended up breaking me in the end.

"He used the Bible – in Timothy it says 'I do not give women authority to teach or have authority over men', so every time I tried to say something to him he would say, 'Don't teach me'. His belief was that all women had to submit to men."

Jane distanced herself from Aaron but because he was trying to get a leadership role in the church she went to her minister and told him what had happened. But after speaking with Aaron, the minister said he didn't believe her. Aaron also spread lies about Jane in the church and many in the congregation rejected her.

"I stopped talking to God, my relationship with God broke down and I became really angry with God, saying, 'How could this happen?' I'd been in the church for years and all of a sudden the minister has turned around and said, 'I don't believe you'. He trusted me with the kids in Sunday school. But he believed Aaron, who was really good at playing the innocent baby, but he wasn't."

Aaron also lied to a Christian lawyer and a social worker who undertook an investigation. Even so, enough doubts had been raised that Aaron's ministry ambitions were thwarted.

At a different church Jane began a relationship with another controlling man, who introduced her to alcohol, which became a problem for her. "He was abusive as well but in a different way, – emotionally," she says. "He gave me a drink and

it was like 'OK, this is what I've been looking for'. "I felt so bad because I was not talking to God and I had started drinking, and now I was sleeping with someone out of marriage, so I was gutted. I knew better and I felt God was not going to forgive me."

Jane fled to another state, where she stayed for some years. She eventually returned to Sydney and to a local church but, two years later, she bumped into Aaron and he physically assaulted her.

"He had followed me home and assaulted me and put my head through the mirror of my wardrobe. He was angry with me. He had stopped going to church and I had ruined things for him. I had wrecked his life.

"My face was smashed up, so I stayed away from church. I wish I had gone so people could have seen the damage but I didn't. I was involved with a group for preschool kids and I didn't want them to see."

After that incident, during one of her nightmares Jane screamed out, prompting a neighbour to

call the police. When the police arrived, they saw her black eyes and took her to the police station and issued an intervention order on Aaron.



However, he came up with alibis and the police believed him.

"He started to come around regularly and assault me," she says. "I would have a freeze response; I didn't know what to do."

Unfortunately, every time Aaron assaulted her, Jane would go on an alcohol binge. And when Jane told her ministers and their wives what was happening, they focused on the alcohol problem and raised doubts about the violence issue.

"I needed to get safe but it was always, 'You need to get the alcohol fixed first' – they just couldn't see it was a symptom," she says.

"It was almost like I wasn't being heard ... You already feel shame and guilt so to not be believed is like being victimised again."

Early last year she had been sober for quite a while when Aaron found her again. All she can remember is being thrown up against her dining table. Three days later she was found unconscious and taken to ICU with a stab wound and a pressure wound from lying on the floor for too long. She was also covered in bruises.

"I was really unwell because he had drugged me," she says. "They found drugs in my system and I don't take drugs. "

After a further assault, in which Jane again ended up in ICU, she was so beyond caring that she wished he had killed her. She also felt very isolated and alone.

She ended up going to rehab for three months, but every time Aaron tracked her down she would "bust" and start drinking again.

"I ended up in ICU again last September," she says. "I can't remember what happened. The community nurse found me and I had no alcohol, no drugs in me but it was trauma."

"I rang [my minister] and said [Aaron] has assaulted me. He said 'Oh, I'm sorry'. And then he said, 'Have you got anything else to tell me?' And I hadn't been drinking, I was actually sober, and I just felt compelled to say I had been drinking just to make him happy.

"They wanted me to go to long-term rehab and I was like, 'I just need to get safe' but they weren't hearing that. Sometimes the problems are just too big to be believed.

"I felt betrayed and violated like I wasn't human but this object everyone was trying to manage."

Another ex-cop, the Rev Mark Layson, rector of St Matthew's, Ashbury, believes middle-class couples are just as likely to experience domestic violence as those "lower on the socioeconomic totem pole, who do more things in open space. But once you get higher and higher up the ladder you do a better job of hiding it. It's behind closed doors. We need to be happy for people to come to church broken. You've got to allow broken people to have broken lives and to find healing."

After the Julia Baird article brought the issue to prominence, Layson issued a statement to his parishioners saying the Bible abhors domestic violence in all its forms and the church should be at the forefront of efforts to stop it and help victims. "There is nowhere in the Bible where it is condoned, none defensible biblically, and we need to teach that," he says.

"I think we need to not try and fight statistics and say, 'There's no real evidence'. It's happening in our churches. We've stuffed up and it hasn't been dealt with properly. We have to admit that." However, he believes clergy need to be pastorally supported to enable them to comfort and protect

victims "because there's a lot of burnt-out clergy out there". He also believes churches need to show biblical leadership by involving men in traditional women's ministries such as Sunday school and morning tea.

"Julia Baird's aim was to preach against male headship and I think instead of male headship being expressed as lording it over people, we need to talk about what it is to be a sacrificial leader," he says. "We have to teach a different understanding of what leadership is to what the world knows and to make sure we model it, display it."

The Rev Andrew Barry, assistant minister at Jannali, has changed his view on the prevalence of domestic violence in the church since the debate erupted in February.

"I definitely have been watching out for it and it's changed my marriage preparation," he says. "I've talked about it in the context of conflict resolution – trying to cut off people being manipulative and abusive in the way they deal with conflict and their roles in the marriage."

Instead of allowing Christians to use the theology of headship and submission as a cover for abuse, "We need to be teaching that husbands need to love their wives and lay down their lives for their wives. I teach on the 1 Peter verse that says, 'Be gentle to your wives so that nothing will hinder your prayers' because I think that God is not to be mocked; people can't stand up in church and then go home and treat their wives badly."

But he believes it is unhelpful to use domestic violence as a way of attacking traditional theology because it alienates Christians and discourages them from fighting it. "Whatever our view and theology on this, we should be united in the fight against domestic violence, not using it to score points against each other," he says.

And if a man has a background of domestic violence, he believes it should be a red card ruling him out of a ministry position.

How to respond

if you recognise or suspect that you, or someone you know, are experiencing domestic violence: Remember that safety for the victims and any children in the household is the

number one priority

- Be aware of the range of ways in which domestic violence can be experienced: emotional, psychological, sexual, financial, physical etc.
- As a victim: speak to someone you trust and get help from those who specialise in dealing with family and domestic violence.
- in dealing with family and domestic violence.
 For someone you know: listen to them and believe their story.
- Help the victim to feel safe: this may mean arranging accommodation away from the home.
 Find out where to get help from those experienced in working with family and domestic violence.
- Do not talk with the perpetrator if the victim feels unsafe or asks you not to.
- If you do speak with the perpetrator, expect them to minimise or deny that anything serious is happening.
 Invite the perpetrator to take responsibility for their behaviour: this may mean attending a group program, getting individual counselling, moving out of home etc.
- Arrange for individual counselling, for both parties if possible. Remember that if there is an established pattern of power and control, relationship counselling is not suitable.
- Do not suggest to the victim that they can improve the situation by changing their behaviour e.g. by loving their partner more or being less argumentative.
- Do not ask the victim to forgive or to reconcile the relationship prematurely.
 Be aware that in some situations, permanent separation or ending the marriage is the only safe option.
- Understand that this may be a crime and may need to be reported to the police and/or Family and Community Services.

Resources

- Anglicare Counselling has counsellors trained in family violence in 10 locations across the Sydney and Wollongong region.
 Domestic and Family Violence App: Aurora
- NSW Government help for

The Cottage Counselling Centre, Narrabeen

- female victims: Domestic Violence: it can happen to anyone
 male victims: Victims Services
- male victims: Victims Services
 perpetrators: Perpetrators Stop Using Violence
- C of E Archbishops Council, Responding to Domestic Abuse: Guidelines For Those With Pastoral Responsibilities (2006)

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