

Responding to Domestic Violence

Biblical reflections¹

Rosemary Isaacs



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In CQ #49, Rosemary Isaacs discussed the challenge every church faces to grow in their capacity to respond with support and compassion to those impacted by domestic violence. This second article, written from a medical point of view, addresses some of the difficult theological issues that may be raised as we seek to respond to individuals in need.²



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Our understanding of the Scriptures deepens as we seek to apply them in the difficult situations of life, returning to them constantly to grapple with troubling questions raised by the challenges we encounter. I believe that the professional knowledge now available about domestic violence (DV) is part of God's gracious gift to us and a way he brings healing, similar to the way that knowledge of cancer medicine is part of the healing God may provide for that illness. It is my prayer that people reading this article will be better prepared to assist others experiencing family violence, or to respond for themselves where it impacts their own lives.

Although this article focuses on intimate partner violence, many of the principles will relate to other situations of family violence. I have used the word 'victim' for those

experiencing this violence, while maintaining respect for what so many individuals do to move beyond victimhood, to build strengths and to help and support their children and others. I do not directly address the abuse of children here, but note that children are often the secondary victims, and witnessing DV is recognised in Australia as a form of child abuse.

It is generally not easy for victims of DV to find a way to leave or resolve their complex situation, particularly when there are children from the DV relationship. Violence and abuse in the home can cause confusion and disbelief for those affected. Long term abusive behaviour in an intimate partnership causes prolonged grief and disappointed hopes. Physical violence, in itself, causes further trauma and

adverse health outcomes. These factors mean that people may have difficulty thinking clearly about the situation they are facing. Living in 'survival mode' leaves people without the energy to plan and find help. Being more aware of the prevalence and impact of DV can assist Christians and churches to create communities of safety and support for those in need.

Until we are aware of a problem we tend not to recognise it, whether it's hidden or in plain sight. Prior to the 1960s, there was no recognition in the English language medical literature of the physical abuse of children and therefore the diagnosis was not considered in cases of unexplained serious injury in babies and children.³ Describing these first recognised cases, and the work done in response, has made a profound difference to the lives of children since.

In 2017, Australian churches were challenged in the media on the question of DV, notably in the ABC report of an investigation by Julia Baird and Hayley Gleeson.⁴ The article 'Women submit to your husbands: Women told to endure domestic violence in the name of God' quotes accounts provided by Christian women who were counselled to stay in abusive situations such that the church was, in many cases, 'enabling and concealing' domestic violence. A loud and troubling section of the response to this publication, according to Baird, seemed more concerned for the reputation of churches than the suffering of the women: 'I have never in my professional career seen the voices of so many women dismissed: academics, psychologists, theologians, church workers, lawyers, reporters and leaders.'⁵ May our God, who is always concerned for the marginalised and oppressed, help us to listen.

Here are some areas where I believe we need to consider the Bible, reflect and pray.

Listening to the vulnerable

While preaching is valuable, we need to accept that a Sunday pulpit style of teaching is not adequate for addressing this issue in the church, even when a humble and well-informed preacher is recommending that people experiencing DV also access professional help. We need to create safe places where we can prayerfully listen to people among us who have experienced DV trauma. Victims may be fragile and exhausted and can feel blamed, degraded and controlled. This is particularly the case when there is complex trauma over a long period of time, or where violence is a repeat of traumatic childhood events. As a result, victims may be ill-equipped to speak up, especially if they have to challenge those in authority. Preachers and church teachers who are naïve to these issues may think they are teaching in a way that

is balanced and reasonable but be heard as judgemental, reinforcing the victim's sense of shame and hopelessness. This makes it likely the victim will internalise the shame and not seek counsel or clarification.

When we listen carefully and respectfully to those who do not find it easy to speak, or are still confused about the trauma they are experiencing, this can help to redress the power imbalance between the teacher/preacher/counsellor and the person in the pew or counselling room. The person living with DV holds the greater knowledge of her own reality and with the right support, can be aided in applying the Scriptures to her specific situation.

Understanding repentance

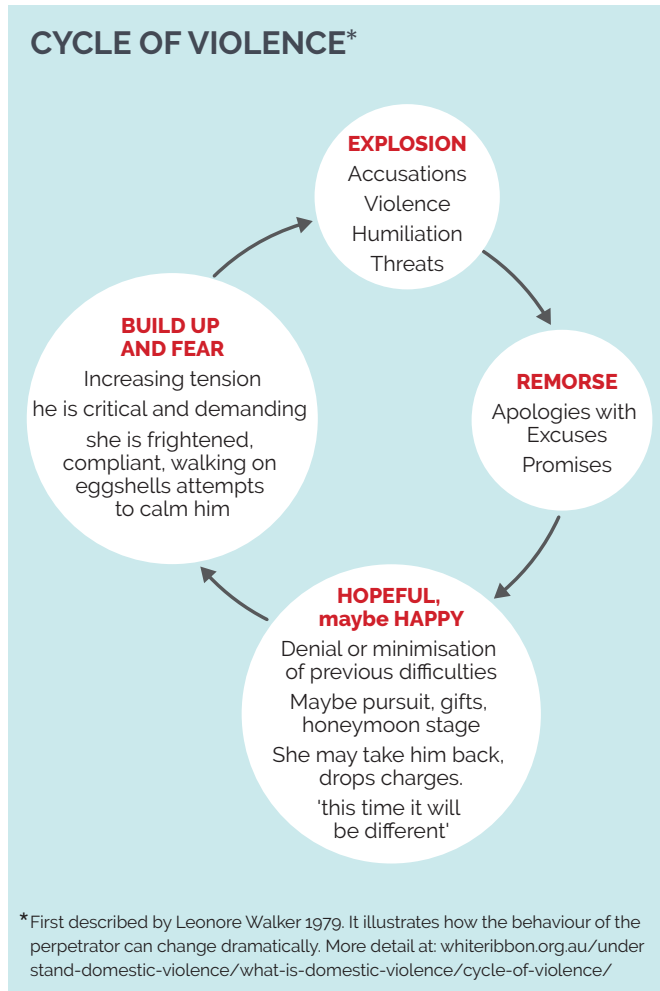
We have seen with recent disclosures about historical child abuse that the church has sometimes held a dangerously inadequate concept of repentance. Leaders have minimised the most serious of sins and have accepted distress, remorse and assertions that 'it will never happen again' as equivalent to 'repentance' (and in some cases, this has happened without the referral of criminal matters to the police). However true repentance from entrenched abusive behaviour will likely involve a slow and difficult turn followed by a hard journey on the narrow path of spiritual and behavioural change with detailed accountability (cf. 2 Corinthians 7:9-11). The repentant perpetrator will direct their indignation, sorrow and alarm at their own sinful behaviour to changing this, and not into blaming another or to preserving their own reputation. True repentance is associated with salvation, but worldly sorrow brings only death (1 Corinthians 8:10). The perpetrator may need to move out of the family home and persist in a long, evidence-based behaviour change program,⁶ and in some cases, accept a decision that it might never again be safe for them to live under the same roof as the family.

An essential step in repentance is for the perpetrator of DV to accept responsibility for his or her own actions. Domestic violence is not a 'marriage problem'. Regardless of the apparent excuse or trigger, the violent or abusive behaviour is never the responsibility of the victim.⁷ Commonly the perpetrator may state that he feels so angry or worked up that he cannot calm down or stop himself. It can be useful to ask what would happen if his boss phoned up during the violent assault: almost invariably the answer is he would speak calmly on the phone. Regardless of whether

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the trigger was the partner arriving home late, or putting the family savings through the pokies, or burning the dinner—and regardless of how upset the person who acted violently felt—the perpetrator is responsible for his own violent actions.

In the context of family violence, the difficulty of maintaining real repentance is illustrated by the ‘Cycle of Violence’ diagram below, which shows behaviour cycling from violent explosion to regret and a time when the relationship appears hopeful and mended



before intimidation and fear build up again. To the outside observer, whether a police officer arriving on the scene or the pastor who knows the couple at church, the perpetrator may well present as calm, reasonable, and in control. The victim on the other hand, living in fear with recent escalation and pain, may feel conflicted about whether she wants to ‘save’ the marriage or report to police. In this case, the victim may present as a neurotic mess and an unreliable witness. Such an impression may seem to be confirmed when the victim, for their own safety, later withdraws their allegation or tries to take the blame. This creates a difficult situation for police and pastoral workers who may be out of their depth when confronted with what can appear to be a series of lies.

There are also non-cyclical patterns of DV. Violence may never abate, and may occur nightly. In other cases the perpetrator may maintain an abusive control with no explosions, no expressed regret and, on the contrary, chillingly or charmingly appropriate the moral high ground and rationalise all his actions. There are also DV situations in which the abuser maintains control with threats or financial or emotional abuse, and where physical violence may be absent.

Marriage breakdown

Our teaching on marriage needs to make it clear that those of us who have been blessed with healthy marriages have been so blessed only by grace and not as a result of our own merits. Such a grace-based theology offers understanding and hope in the reality of marriage breakdown and divorce, while simultaneously working to strengthen loving marriages and friendships. The only path out of violence may be separation or divorce.

Churches also need to beware of an approach which overemphasises marriage and the nuclear family to the devaluing of other relationships within the church family. This can have a number of distorting effects for both married and single Christians and these can include making it harder for hurting individuals or families to find support and respite.

‘Turning the other cheek’

These challenging words of Jesus in Matthew 5:39 are directed to a situation in which the victim has the power to retaliate (and where retaliation seems reasonable), but, as a follower of Jesus, chooses to forgo the opportunity to take ‘an eye for an eye’. It does not mean that anyone should function as a doormat. Jesus never responded to violence with violence, but he did challenge unrighteous behaviour, especially by those in power. When Jesus was actually struck on the cheek in the lead-up to his crucifixion, he neither hit back nor simply accepted it, but verbally challenged the man who did it (John 18:23). The Christian practices of not returning evil with evil and not letting bitterness grow are complemented by finding appropriate and safe ways to love and forgive those who hurt us (Romans 12:17, Ephesians 4:17-32).

Within a family home there is greater vulnerability and intensity than for other relationships outside the home and so greater safety is required. Forgiveness and love require appropriate and safe boundaries: where there is violence this is likely to mean separation, police involvement or other strong measures. Calling the police in response to DV is not an act of retaliation but a way of working for

justice and safety, which in turn benefits the whole community. Perpetrators of violence may narcissistically accuse the victim of deliberately hurting them by taking self-protecting actions such as calling the police or moving out of a violent situation, and make statements such as 'you hurt me so much by taking the kids away' or 'I cannot go on without you'. These assertions must be seen for what they are: a further attempt by the perpetrator to control the victim or avoid taking responsibility for his own actions. The victim is moving to safety, not taking revenge. There are many biblical examples of godly people removing themselves from avoidable assault.⁸

The apostle Peter states that it is better to suffer for doing good than evil (1 Peter 3:17), and Paul urges Christians to be patient in affliction, bless those who persecute them, and overcome evil with good (Romans 12). There are many Christians in the world today, as there were in the 1st Century, who, due to the unjust structures of the society in which they live, have no safe recourse from abuse and violence, or slavery. In this situation they draw strength, grace and love from Jesus who suffered for them. We who have greater legal and cultural protections have the responsibility to consider what we can do to 'do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, and plead the widow's cause' and the cause of the victims of domestic violence (my extrapolation of Isaiah 1:17).

Forgiveness and trust

Forgiveness is by grace, but I would propose that trust must be earned. Forgiveness does not imply trust. Forgiveness is complex and we need to be very careful before we, who may have only experienced much more minor debts, judge someone else who says that they cannot at this time forgive an offender who has done great harm to them. Some wounds are so deep that a person can only function by psychologically walling them off and trying not to think about them. The normal path of forgiveness is to first remember the offence so that forgiveness can proceed, but the emotional pain associated with this memory may be too horrific for some victims to contemplate, especially those who experienced prolonged abuse, or experienced childhood abuse. The effects of recurrent abuse on trauma responses and coping accumulate, often with disabling effect. People in this situation may be showing great grace by forgoing revenge (a key characteristic of forgiveness) and seeking not to live in bitterness. In this way they fulfil, as they are able, the biblical teaching on forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35). Not all psychological or emotional wounds will be fully healed in this life.

Compassion for the perpetrator

The clear statement that violence is always unacceptable and never the responsibility of the victim by no means denies that the perpetrator may be carrying many burdens, and be themselves worthy of compassion. Many other traumas may predispose people to perpetrating DV, including war, post-traumatic stress disorder, childhood abuse, the refugee experience, or recent unemployment. Individuals who have experienced certain illnesses and addictions may also be more prone to acting violently than someone who has not been through such difficult life experiences. Those of us who have had much easier lives are no more righteous than that person, and should not look down on him. Our spiritual condemnation should be directed towards the action, not the person.

When a victim is disclosing violence by a spouse or someone they care for, it is rarely helpful for the listener to respond by condemning the perpetrator. This may cause the victim herself to feel further shamed, or—aware of the background problems of the perpetrator—she may respond by defending him. It is helpful, though, to clearly condemn the perpetrator's unacceptable behaviour.

We each bear a responsibility for letting children and adults become traumatised and devalued in our neighbourhoods and in the world. This should not allow us to forget however, that violence in the family is always a choice and that choosing violence is never acceptable. It disqualifies one from ministry and many other roles, and is, thankfully, illegal.

The path to recovery for a perpetrator starts when they take responsibility for their behaviour and the changes they need to make. There are free confidential phone counselling services for all those dealing with family and relationship difficulties, including being perpetrators or victims of DV.⁹ They can be accessed anonymously.

Headship and submission

There are various understandings of the passages¹⁰ stating that wives must submit to their husbands and that the husband is the head of the wife, and detailing these is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, it is my intention to offer direct applications to the topic of DV which apply across a number of variations in interpretation.¹¹ There may be a range of patterns of marriage which can fall within the bounds of biblical, loving and healthy behaviour, partly determined by culture and partly by individual personalities.

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But I do offer the opinion that any healthy pattern of marriage will be characterised by each party loving and respecting the other, and each member of the couple being involved in the decision making that applies to the couple.

For those who teach a model of male headship and female submission in marriage from Scripture, it is important—though never sufficient—to state clearly that physical violence and also coercion (sexual or otherwise) have no place in a marriage modelled on the love of our Saviour—or indeed in any healthy marriage. Men who wish to abuse power, with or without violence, may attempt to justify their actions and attitudes by citing these Scriptures. Any teaching on headship needs to be complemented with considerable effort and time given to describing the fuller picture of loving, godly marriages with mutual flourishing, and citing scriptural examples of valuing the wife's gifts and initiatives.¹²

Even when this kind of care is taken, there are still very real challenges for communicating this teaching effectively to hearers who have at some time lived in an abusive home and are likely to default to interpreting teaching about male headship in terms of strong memories of abusive power. Thoughtful and faithful teaching of this and any Scripture must be informed by the voices and responses of the marginalised and abused, of both sexes and all ages.¹³

The Old and New Testaments hold a vast amount of teaching on relationships which is applicable to marriage and family. Love is the core of the two greatest commandments identified by our Lord Jesus (Matthew 22:36-40) and the characteristic by which his followers will be known (John 13:35). God himself 'is Love' (1 John 4:7-11). Bible teaching specific to marriage should be read within this broader teaching about all relationships. Marriage is, in one sense, a variation on an underlying Christian brother-sister, fellow-servant relationship, and the marriage component of that relationship is limited to this life, and so only part of their relationship as joint heirs of Christ.¹⁴

The following simple framework may be of some assistance and I believe is applicable in both 'complementarian' and 'egalitarian' theological frameworks.

1. Inevitably power and vulnerability imbalances will occur in marriages. Different degrees of resiliency in life, sickness and health, dementia and other changes of ageing, may alter abilities to lead and serve, and also impact vulnerability to abuse.
2. In any relationship, the stronger party has more capacity to cope with any abuse and is less likely to be harmed. To illustrate, parents can cheerfully cope with withering verbal abuse from a young child ('I want to put mummy in the toilet and flush the button') without any harm to their own well-being. In 21st Century Australia there are still many areas of power imbalance in favour of men, and this can be compounded by differences in physical strength.
3. Everyone is far from perfect, and so relationships cannot function without grace, forgiveness and thankfulness.
4. Where there is safety, trust and cooperation enable the flourishing of both parties. Trust requires vulnerability. Sleeping in the same bed, sharing confidences and prayers, sharing finances and co-parenting can bring joy but require voluntary vulnerability to the other.
5. If violence occurs or there is a pattern of abusive behaviour, it is no longer safe to be vulnerable, and this will cause a partial or complete fracture in the marriage. Even when abuse is followed by true repentance and generous forgiveness, it is still vital to think through how to create a safe situation for those who have been victims. Some trust and openness will need to be withdrawn to enable psychological and physical safety. The safety plan needs to function with a significant buffer zone for times of increasing stress to cope with the ups and downs of married life.
6. Violence and abuse lie outside any informed biblical understanding of male headship and wifely submission. Coercion, intimidation, and bullying are forms of abuse.¹⁵
7. It is unhelpful and misleading to use the word 'submission' to describe the situation where a woman is staying in a marriage where abuse is occurring. Women (and sometimes men) may, for a range of reasons, choose to stay in an abusive marriage and endure and manage the abuse where possible. To use the word 'submission' for this choice can wrongly imply an acceptance of victim status and an acquiescence to the attitudes of the abuser. It also easily leads to the misconception that this is what was intended by the apostles' teaching on marital submission in the Epistles.
8. 'Love' is a word that can cause great confusion. Perpetrators and victims of abuse may feel sincere in saying that they 'love' their spouse and children, and this may cloud decisions. Clarity can come from focusing on the behaviours that would flow out of 'love', such as patience, kindness, honouring others, not being easily angered and so on (1 Corinthians 13), rather than focusing on the word 'love' itself, which can be used to mean many things, including possessiveness, neediness and jealousy.



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Respect for decisions of others

It can be hard to accept the decisions of others at times: whether they choose to leave their abusive partners, to not leave yet, or to stay. Some women have felt judged by friends and church for leaving; others for staying. Leaving is often the most dangerous time in terms of escalation of violence. We need to respect the hard-won expertise many women have developed in managing their very difficult situations, and the complex and difficult decisions they may need to make about timing when leaving. It can be hard to patiently listen, pray and wait, maintaining a readiness to help when asked. Maintaining contact and friendship can be a vital support even when the suspected victim of DV does not want to share what is happening. Emergencies, witnessing violence and the need to protect children may call for interference (calling the police), but many other situations call for patient non-interfering support, which may help empower the victim to make her own decisions. In Australia we can readily access professional advice on free phone counselling services to assess the best ways to help as a neighbour or friend.¹⁶

There is a special danger in judging that the person fearfully seeking our help is overreacting because we do not see any injuries, or because they seem to be functioning well in home and work. It is possible to inflict serious or life-threatening injury on hidden parts of the body, or without leaving marks. Moreover, physical violence is not the only indicator of severe abuse. Threats, disempowerment and isolation can be equally devastating.

Assessing church and community structures

When serving people who have experienced family violence, systems and providers that lack understanding of its complex impacts risk causing further harm.¹⁷ The World Health Organisation promotes an ecological model of responding to the enormous health burden

caused by family violence that recognises that change and help are needed at the individual, family, community and society levels.¹⁸ Over the last decade it has been encouraging to see organisations developing resources for churches¹⁹ to assist them to understand and respond appropriately to individuals and families. These supplement the very good professional resources in the wider community.²⁰ It has also been heartening to see rigorous work on programs to make our churches safe for children and adults from abuse inside church programs.²¹

A further vital current challenge is for each church to rigorously review its structures and activities from the perspective of being emotionally safe places for victims of family violence to share their experiences and seek support. I expect answering this challenge will prompt further disclosures of violence from inside the congregation, and increase numbers seeking help and support from the church. This may require more tailored support and ministries. Offering assistance to perpetrators who wish to change is an important specialised ministry that can be supported by the church in practical ways provided there is adequate independent professional involvement.

We need to respect the hard-won expertise many women have developed in managing their very difficult situations.

How can we start this review?

Consider the activities and communication channels of your church, including the preaching and website, from the perspective of the real-life experience of vulnerable people.²² What words or actions might trigger painful memories or replicate exclusion and abuse? It could be salutary to work through how your church's current programs and attitudes may appear to someone who has undisclosed difficulties: would they feel judged or excluded as unreliable, or unwilling to commit, and hence




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somehow immature or half-hearted? Do your church websites or programs imply that 'model' Christians will be in intact families? Consider the counsel a person might receive if asking for prayer or advice on their marriage or kids. How would that counsel be heard by someone hiding their experience of DV due to fear or shame? Unfortunately, too much didactic pastoral advice can be given on the basis of very partial facts (e.g. go back to the marriage, pray and try harder). If the pastor has misunderstood the situation due to inadequate disclosure, there can be an implication that the woman is to blame for not telling all. Instead the pastor should qualify his or her advice and acknowledge that issues associated with domestic violence are common and often hard to disclose.

Trauma has lifelong and intergenerational effects. Most readers, like myself, benefit from the great blessings of a country that was taken—with great personal abuse and no reparation—from the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, whose lives and family relationships are significantly impacted by generational trauma and family disruption. On a smaller scale many small acts of disrespect, criticism and temper at the workplace, commute or

checkout may ripple into the home of the recipient of such 'minor' abuse, just as conversely, kindness and forbearance may also ripple into blessing. The person who consistently shows Christian gentleness and humility is likely to be the one to whom a person in need will turn for support and help.

Consider also the teaching, help and Christian community your church provides to young people and children, especially from the perspective of those who may be coming from a violent home.

Martin Luther King Jr stated 'Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anaemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.'²³ Most readers of this article are likely to have power, love and many opportunities to correct those things that stand against love. Let us use them. 

The person who consistently shows Christian gentleness and humility is likely to be the one to whom a person in need will turn.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The relationship (historically and theologically) between violence and Christianity is complex, and has been debated for centuries. Byron Smith discusses the topic generally in *CQ #9* ('Christian Violence?' 2006, pp25-26), and recommends further reading. For a theological treatment of domestic violence, see Andrew Errington's discussion of Lamech in 'On Male Violence' in this issue (pp9-13), but its origins stretch back even further. The words of Genesis 4 are almost too painful to read: Adam and Eve, these parents who took matters into their own hands, watch as their beautiful eldest boy cold-bloodedly murders his younger brother. The depth of the tragedy of their rebellion against God is just starting to be felt.
- 2 Rosemary acknowledges and values the contribution made to her understanding of these issues by many who have told her of their own painful experiences of family violence.
- 3 C. H. Kempe, Frederic N. Silverman, et. al., 'The Battered Child Syndrome'. *Journal of the American Medical Association* Vol.181, 1962, pp17-24.
- 4 abc.net.au/news/2017-07-18/domestic-violence-church-submit-to-husbands/8652028
- 5 abc.net.au/news/2018-05-23/when-women-are-believed-the-church-will-change/9782184
- 6 aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi404, www.relationshipsvictoria.com.au/services/familyviolence/MBCP/
- 7 Except in situations of self-defence, which do not properly fit in the definition of DV.
- 8 E.g. David (1 Samuel 18:11, 19:10, 23:14); Jesus (John 7:1, 8:59); Paul (Acts 9:22-25, 14:5-6, 17:10); Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-4).
- 9 1300 789978 <https://mensline.org.au/> and several State specific services including www.dvconnect.org/mensline/, www.caringdads.org
- 10 May include Ephesians 5:22ff, 1 Corinthians 11:3 ff, 1 Timothy 2:13; 5:1-16, 1 Peter 3:1-8, Proverbs 31:10ff, Genesis 2 & 3.
- 11 moore.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Domestic-Violence-A-starting-point-in-supporting-victims.pdf
- 12 E.g. Proverbs 31, 1 Timothy 5:10-11.
- 13 moore.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Domestic-Violence-A-starting-point-in-supporting-victims.pdf
- 14 E.g. Matthew 22:30, Romans 8, 1 Peter 3:7.
- 15 In the course of writing this article I have become aware that there is a minor but significant branch of late 20th century publishing on gender role theology which teaches that married women have no independent decision-making agency, and should accept violent behaviour by their husbands. For a clear refutation and correction, see Steven Tracy, 'What Does "Submit in Everything" Really Mean? The Nature and Scope of Marital Submission'. *Trinity Journal* (2008).
- 16 1800 Respect
- 17 C.M. Varcoe, C.N. Wathen, M. Ford-Gilboe, et.al., *VEGA Briefing Note on Trauma- and Violence- Informed Care*. VEGA Project and PreVAiL Research Network, 2016. <http://projectvega.ca>
- 18 www.who.int/violenceprevention/approach/ecology/en/
- 19 For example, the Joint Queensland Churches Domestic Violence Project 2014 (www.qct.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1516&Itemid=185), and very recently, Common Grace's *SAFER: A resource to help Churches understand, identify and respond to domestic and family violence* (www.saferresource.org.au). Some are in constant development: www.fixinghereyes.org/domestic-violence
- 20 For example, www.1800respect.org.au, www.fullstopfoundation.org.au/, www.whiteribbon.org.au/, www.domesticviolence.nsw.gov.au/what-is-domestic-violence,
- 21 <https://safeministry.org.au/>
- 22 It's helpful to do this review for a variety of challenges that current or potential church members may face. How does your church community work for a person with a physical disability who wants to maintain their independence (more than ramps), for a teenager with an autism spectrum disorder, for someone whose mental health makes small groups challenging, and so on.
- 23 Martin Luther King, Jr. August 16, 1967 'Where Do We Go From Here?' Speech Delivered at the 11th Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Atlanta, GA.