

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

An outline of the issue presented by Basil Rebera at the meeting at City Church on Monday 16 May, following the invitation in City's Connections to a meeting for men to reflect on the issue of men and domestic and family violence.

Over the past couple of years the media have been giving increasing exposure to the incidence of domestic and family violence against women and girls. The shocking bludgeoning of Mark to death by his father in public caused national shock and outrage. Mark's grieving mother, Rosie Batty, courageously began a campaign against domestic abuse and violence. Her courage and tenacity, in publicising the issue resulted in her being elected Australian of the Year 2015. In this role she brought the issue of domestic abuse and violence to the attention and conscience of the nation.

Violence by men against women occurs in every society throughout the world. Here in Australia it is present in epidemic proportions. It takes a heavy toll on female life—a woman dies of domestic or family violence every week. It occurs here in Australia among all communities, Anglo-Australian, Indigenous, Asian, African, Islander, Latino and European.

Domestic and family violence is intentional use of violence by men to threaten, force, control, intimidate or manipulate a family member, a partner or former partner. This violence is not incidental or inadvertent. It is intentional. It increases, not diminishes, and increases in severity as time goes on. It is a means of exercising total control over a partner. Women and children often live in fear of abuse, as a result of the abuse used by the perpetrator to control them

Indigenous women make up 50% of domestic violence victims. Women with disabilities are assaulted, raped and abused at a rate of at least two times greater than non-disabled women. Women of non-Western communities who are constrained by cultural traditions are susceptible to isolation and are vulnerable to family and domestic violence. Domestic and family violence have adverse physical, psychological and financial consequences for both individuals and the wider community.

Domestic and family violence are often hidden as many women and children, girls mainly, are too scared to speak out, and the perpetrators adapt their behaviour in the presence of others to appear as caring and friendly people.

Alcohol and drug use, lower inhibition, but are no excuse for violence. But the bulk of domestic violence is by men who at the time are not under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Domestic violence is not confined to lower socio economic groups. It is experienced by women and children of all social, economic, religious and cultural backgrounds. This includes members of the Christian community of all denominations.

Domestic violence has a terrible effect on children. Even if they are not direct victims, what they witness takes a terrible toll of them. Consequences include increased likelihood of physical abuse, depression, anxiety, developmental regression, trust issues and increased likelihood of becoming involved in a violent relationship as an adult. It has an insidious influence on boys, particularly. The adult male perpetrator becomes the role model and his attitude and conduct are internalised by the young males. They are conditioned to believe in male primacy in the home and family relationships. And they are convinced by the example of their role model that the inherent adjunct of this status is the subjugation of females in a relationship through intimidation, abuse, violence and coerced economic dependence. There is an equally insidious impact on girls growing up in that environment. They internalise the subjugation they witness as the normal, deserved and appropriate role for them: deference to the male gender.

Women and girls are captives where there is domestic violence. It is deceptively easy to think that women only have to walk out to escape their predicament. This is naïve, or even cavalier male thinking. Women are ashamed to even talk about the oppression they experience. Women fear retaliation if they share their experience with others. In some communities the culture stigmatises the victims and their families, and so they remain silent. Women fear that they or their children, will be killed if they left their violent partner. Women who are financially dependent on their persecutor would be destitute if they left. Most of the time there isn't adequate protection or refuge for the victims and their children. They are simply resigned to live out their lives in a helpless state of submission, and fear.

The campaign against domestic violence has so far been mainly conducted by organisations and groups outside the Church. The Church finds itself in an invidious position in regard to the issue of family violence. Subservient to the patriarchal and male centred norms of the ancient communities represented in Scripture, the Church has in its teaching, organisation and pastoral practice adopted the code of male entitlement to dominance and authority and the relegation of the female to subordination and submission. Changes have taken place, though, in the Uniting Church and other denominations' church structures, leadership and pastoral practice. But the reputation remains and perceptions in the community outside the Church have not changed.

In a recent interview on Radio National Breakfast the former Governor General Quentin Bryce said that we must work for the eradication of domestic violence. Amelioration is not the goal. But eradication is only possible if it is eradicated at the source and that requires the transformation of the attitudes and conduct of MEN. It is therefore imperative that men in the Church take ownership and leadership in bringing about this transformation.

There are actions, by men, at the national and state level, who are advocating against domestic violence, one such is the White Ribbon Foundation. Those of us who were at the meeting on 16 May, have undertaken to explore these areas of action, and bring them to the notice of our congregations. When this happens, the men of the two congregations of City, the Toe Talatalanoa and St Columba congregations are encouraged to support and participate in ways that would bring about a transformation in the attitudes and conduct of men to see an end to domestic and family violence.

Watch this space!