

The Holy Hush in Our Backyards: Family Violence and the Church

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Abstract

Family violence is a well-kept secret in much of the evangelical church. This article examines concerning rates of family violence in southeastern Manitoba, which reflects similar trends in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. It then explores the reasons for the silence that surrounds it, including the veneration of the Christian family, euphemisms which serve to hide potentially abusive attitudes, pastoral pressures and lack of abuse response training, and the use of the theological concept of forgiveness to keep abused women in their marriages. It then goes on to explore contributing factors to the high rates of violence, including the application of female submission in abuse contexts, teachings on divorce, and the dominance of male authority in the evangelical church.

Family violence is a term Christians have not typically associated with the evangelical Christian church. But with the increasing number of studies revealing high levels of abuse in Christian homes, and the #ChurchToo movement that followed hard on the heels of the #MeToo movement, that lack of awareness is a part of the silence that allows these forms of abuse to continue. Situated within the increasing depopulation of the evangelical church,¹ these two social ills (family violence and clergy sexual abuse) within the church are likely related to that depopulation. A time of reckoning is upon us.

¹ Valerie Hiebert, "Megachurches in the United States: Co-Sanctified Lexicons as Worldviews," *The Routledge International Handbook of Sociology and Christianity*, ed. Dennis Hiebert (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2024), 230–41.

In my twenty plus years of teaching courses such as “Children and Violence,” “Marriage and Family,” and “Men, Women and Society” at a private Christian university, as well as advocating publicly for greater awareness around violence in Christian homes, I received upwards of a hundred stories of domestic abuse. Examples where the victim disclosed to friends and community would include a grandfather sexually abusing his grandchild, a child psychologically and verbally battered by an uncle, a wife routinely physically assaulted and psychologically controlled by her husband, a brother sexually abusing his brother, siblings who watched their mother beaten multiple times a week by their father, and a pastor and denominational leader sexually abusing family members. I could go on. On rare occasions, a story included a female perpetrator. Now teaching at a public university, I continue to receive stories of students from Christian families disclosing a wide variety of abuses inside their Christian families and churches. Among them are stories of newcomers to Canada whose Christian heritage has taught young women to submit to severe forms of male domestic and religious power at all costs.

In the work that I do for the Mennonite Central Committee’s Abuse Response and Prevention Program, I see that, for every such story that goes public, many more do not. Christian families and churches, filled with perpetrators and victims of abuse, are living silently with their wounds and ongoing abuses. While addressing the issue of clergy misconduct and abuse is as urgent as addressing family violence, this article will focus on family violence in Christian homes and churches. Along with the extensive data already present in this field of research, at points, stories and information from local practitioners and my own work will be brought in to illustrate the observations being made.²

Family Violence

Family violence takes many forms.³ *Verbal abuse* includes yelling, arguing, belittling, threatening, name-calling, or swearing. *Emotional/psychological abuse* takes the form of intimidating, playing mind games, unrealistic or unfair demands, lying, threatening to harm the self or the partner. *Financial abuse* is the controlling or withholding of financial

² All names and identifiers have been removed to honour confidentiality commitments to the victims.

³ The terms *family violence* and *domestic abuse* are used somewhat interchangeably in this article. Much of the research uses the term *domestic abuse*, but the term has been transitioning in practice contexts (e.g., therapy, response prevention).

resources or incurring of debts. *Physical abuse* involves hitting, slapping, pinching, punching, kicking, shoving, punching holes in walls, throwing things, or using weapons. *Sexual abuse* is the infliction of sexual contact or behaviour by force or intimidation, manipulation, or deceit. *Neglect abuse* is the absence of proper food, nutrition, hygiene care, social interaction, and basic safety in a child's daily life.

Based on self-reported data from the Government of Canada's General Social Science Survey, currently "44% of women who had ever been in an intimate partner relationship—or about 6.2 million women 15 years of age and older—reported experiencing some kind of psychological, physical, or sexual violence in the context of an intimate relationship in their lifetime (since the age of 15)."⁴ If we look specifically at the Christian population, the rates range from "28% of respondents [who] admitted to having been abused in some way,"⁵ to "nearly half of the respondents (46%) reported experiencing common couple violence [primarily female victims],"⁶ to "more than 50% of Christian women in our sample reported experiencing at least one form of abuse from their current or previous intimate partner."⁷ Given these rates, it is accurate to observe, as many researchers have done, that the rates of "domestic abuse within church... congregations is similar to the rate within the general population."⁸ Some

⁴ Adam Coter, "Intimate Partner Violence in Canada, 2018: An Overview," *Juristat* 41, no. 1 (April 21, 2021): 5. While almost all of the research indicates male violence and female victims, there are also occasional male victims. This article assumes that reality, but it is important to acknowledge the general assumption that rates of abused adult males and child abuse are even more under-reported than family violence rates.

⁵ Ann W. Annis and Rodger R. Rice, "A Survey of Abuse Prevalence in the Christian Reformed Church," *Journal of Religion & Abuse* 3, no. 3–4 (2001): 38.

⁶ René D. Drumm, Marciana Popescu, Duane C. McBride, Gary L. Hopkins, Jerome D. Thayer, and Jan Wrenn, "Intimate Partner Violence in a Conservative Christian Denomination: Prevalence and Types," *Social Work & Christianity* 33, no. 3 (2006): 233.

⁷ Mei-Chuan Wang, Sharon G. Horne, Heidi M. Levitt, and Lisa M. Klesges, "Christian Women in IPV: An Exploratory Study of Religious Factors," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 28, no. 3 (2009): 231–32. Note that these studies are merely the tip of the iceberg in terms of the data available from well over a hundred studies conducted primarily in the United Kingdom, Australia, United States, and Canada. Many of the rates have overlapping themes and results.

⁸ Heidi M. Levitt and Kimberly Ware, "Anything with Two Heads Is a Monster: Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Marriage Equality and Domestic Violence," *Violence against Women* 12, no. 12 (2006): 1169–90; Marciana Popescu and Rene Drumm, "Religion, Faith Communities, and Intimate Partner Violence," *Social Work & Christianity* 36, no. 4 (2009): 375–78; Leonie Westenberg, "When She Calls for Help—Domestic Violence in Christian Families," *Social Sciences* 6, no. 3 (September 2017): art. 71, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/6/3/71>; Nancy Nason-Clark, "Christianity and the Experience

studies have attempted to identify if rates of family violence are higher in more conservative churches, and those results are mixed. Unfortunately, “studies on IPV [intimate partner violence] relying on national survey data have been widely critiqued for crude measurement and neglecting to assess psychological abuse, terror, and the processes within which the violence occurs.”⁹ Among these problems of methodological crudity is that of asking abusers to report their own violence, which clearly is not going to offer accurate rates. These are the types of studies which Brad Wilcox relied on significantly in his *Christianity Today* article in which he concluded that Christian men are less abusive than the general public.¹⁰

Closer to home, Isaac Block surveyed thirty-six Mennonite churches in Winnipeg using random sampling to identify 189 respondents regarding childhood abuse. The respondents’ church attendance averaged three and a half out of four Sundays, indicating a high level of religious commitment. The distribution of respondents was 71% female and 29% male. Those who reported being pushed or slapped was 20.8%, 14.9% reported being hit with an object, 11.2% had something thrown at them, 5.9% were kicked, and 19.4% reported being sexually abused. The sexual abuse categories ranged from inappropriate holding and fondling of breasts and genitals to forced sex, with forced sex being the most commonly repeated abuse type, ranging from approximately twice to four times as often as the other sexual offence types.¹¹ Note that these rates do not include spousal violence.

Deborah Handziuk’s interview-based research with women who were victims of sexual violence in rural Manitoban homes complements Block’s statistics by adding further details and first-hand accounts of the experience.¹² The perpetrators in Handziuk’s research were male relatives—

of Domestic Violence: What Does Faith Have to Do with It,” *Social Work & Christianity* 36, no. 4 (2009): 379–93.

⁹ Nicole Knickmeyer, Heidi Levitt, and Sharon G. Horne, “Putting on Sunday Best: The Silencing of Battered Women within Christian Faith Communities,” *Feminism & Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2010): 95; Martin D. Schwartz, “Methodological Issues in the Use of Survey Data for Measuring and Characterizing Violence against Women,” *Violence against Women* 6, no. 8 (2000): 815–38.

¹⁰ Brad Wilcox, “Evangelicals and Domestic Abuse: Are Christian Men More Abusive?” *Christianity Today*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/december-web-only/evangelicals-domestic-violence-christian-men-domestic-abuse.html>.

¹¹ Isaac Block, *Assault on God’s Image: Domestic Abuse* (Winnipeg: Windflower Communications, 1991), 52–58.

¹² Deborah Gayle Handziuk, “The Climate for Disclosure: An Examination of Sexual Abuse among Rural Mennonite Families” (master’s thesis, University of Manitoba,

fathers, uncles, cousins—and four-fifths of the victims had multiple perpetrators, with one having as many as nine (father, uncles, cousins).¹³ For more than half of the research participants the abuse began between the ages of two and four, and for all the victims the abuse lasted until they were in their mid- to late teens. Over half of Handziuk's participants disclosed to an adult early within the time frame of the abuse (ages three to six), but in all cases no action was taken. Handziuk observes that “all of the women felt that the attitude and approach of the Mennonite church and family to sexual abuse by a relative did not foster, encourage or support disclosures,” with her participants observing that the beliefs of the church “contributed to their continued silence.”¹⁴ Based on the responses of the participants, Handziuk concluded that “the Mennonite community viewed all abuse as the responsibility of the woman and not the perpetrator.”¹⁵ The deeply patriarchal nature of these Mennonite families and churches resulted in these women “simply seen as angry, hysterical women...[whom] you don't have to listen to.”¹⁶ The participants also identified the problematic nature of being told to pray about it and to forgive as a resolution to either ongoing abuse, or historical abuse in their lives, both of which were experienced as a way of simply getting the victim to “stop talking” about it.¹⁷ I trust that the irony of these results (Block and Handziuk) is not lost on us: while a central theological identity of Mennonites is non-violence, there are high levels of violence inside Mennonite homes. We continue to observe this same reality in our current work.

Rod Buxton conducted a study at Grant Memorial Baptist Church in Winnipeg, with part of the study design being a twelve-week adult class on domestic abuse. Among various other conclusions, Buxton noted that the class included numerous abuse victims, and that “if the class was any indication of what will result if women begin to talk about the problem, then it is clear that an abused spouse would be at risk of further abuse from the other members of the church.”¹⁸

1993).

¹³ One exception to these rates is a victim where both the mother and father were sexually abusive, and in addition to her parents, she was also sexually abused by a non-family member whom she did not disclose in the study.

¹⁴ Handziuk, “The Climate for Disclosure,” 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁸ Rod Buxton, “Domestic Violence in the Church: There is an Elephant in the Sanctuary and No-One is Talking About It. The Results of a Manitoba Survey,” *Didaskalia* 12, no. 1 (Fall 2000): 75.

In response to my observation that the rates of childhood male sexual abuse are higher in our area than people realize, a career family physician in southeastern Manitoba noted that, in spite of my informed levels of awareness, I would still be very surprised by how many disclosures of such a nature this doctor has received over the course of their medical career.

In an interview, a victim-survivor of childhood abuse (which occurred in the early 1990s, from age ten to eighteen) speaks of the Steinbach church she grew up attending, where teaching from the pulpit emphasized the importance of breaking the will of children in order to be broken for God.¹⁹ This “breaking” was encouraged primarily through physical punishment which included being repetitively hit over the buttocks with a church approved, thick, leather belt as the instrument of choice. She spent the better part of her childhood in virtually constant flight or fight mode, locked in her bedroom for hours every two to three days, intermittently lectured about how her sinfulness would send her to hell, and being hit repetitively with the aforementioned leather belt. This experience was not unique to her. At church camp meetings, the children would exchange stories of the beatings they had received, comparing bruises and other injuries (which extended beyond the buttocks). This victim-survivor is in contact with numerous other survivors, and two victims recently recounted being held down and beat until they consented to accepting Christ as their Saviour. During her childhood, all the children of church families were routinely coached about the evils of Child and Family Services (CFS) and how they were to respond if they were ever asked questions by a CFS worker. This church currently continues to teach and enact all these practices. In our work, we receive stories from other churches that have similarities to this victim-survivor’s experiences. As horrific as it sounds, these are the things happening in our own backyards.

In an interview with Genesis House executive director, Angela Braun, she notes that while their catchment area is very large, approximately half of the women they shelter are members of conservative evangelical churches in the Winkler area.²⁰

In summary, irrespective of where or how you gather the data in southeastern Manitoba, we find indications of both historic and current family violence in Christian churches and families. Yet, despite its presence

¹⁹ Personal interview, April 25, 2024.

²⁰ Angela Braun, personal interview with author, April 25, 2024.

in our backyards, it is surrounded by a “holy hush,”²¹ with very few churchgoers having an accurate awareness of it.

Breaking the Silence

A common sociological mantra suggests that, before providing a prescription to solve a social problem, you need a good description of it. It follows that a good description will often go a long way to suggesting potential directions for an effective prescription. To break the silence around the violence happening in Christian homes, we need an understanding of why the silence is present and the ways in which it is operative.

Veneration of Family

Most faith communities view the intact nuclear family on a pedestal, viewing it as a symbol of the power and virtue of Christian living. One narrative among evangelicals has been to lament the attack of secular culture on the Christian family, labelling the “outside world” as an antagonistic force. As noted by Westenberg and other researchers previously cited in this article, whether naïvely unaware or wilfully blind to the high levels of violence among the people of the church, the enforcement of this narrative of the Christian family as a beacon of light places enormous pressure on religious women experiencing violence in their homes.²² They perceive their abusive reality as a dark mark of shame on this narrative. They blame themselves and fear that if they disclose the abuse, they will be negatively labelled by their church leaders, let down their church community, and ultimately disappoint God. It is a common theme in the research that women feel compelled “to present a facade of the perfect Christian woman and family in local church communities” to protect the reputation of the Christian institution of marriage along with their own reputation.²³ The reality of “violent religious men, violated religious women, and church couples in conflict pose a direct challenge to the message of marital bliss and ‘happy family living’ so enthusiastically endorsed by clergy across North

²¹ Steve McMullin, Nancy Nason-Clark, Barbara Fisher-Townsend, and Cathy Holtmann, “When Violence Hits the Religious Home: Raising Awareness about Domestic Violence in Seminaries and amongst Religious Leaders,” *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling* 69, no. 2 (2015): 118.

²² Westenberg, “When She Calls for Help.”

²³ Ibid.

America.”²⁴ “All too often the preservation of marriage has been exalted as the highest good, even when human life is at stake.”²⁵

Euphemisms

The English writer Quentin Crisp describes euphemisms as “unpleasant truths wearing diplomatic cologne.”²⁶ In the context of Christian family violence (which refers to both violence against partners and violence against children), it is not unusual for pastors to resist using identifiers such as intimate partner violence or wife abuse.²⁷ Their theology “regards abusive behavior between marital partners as evidence that God’s design for marriage bliss has been either misunderstood or abandoned.”²⁸ Rather than using accurate terms that describe what has occurred, such as wife abuse or intimate partner violence, pastors prefer euphemistic descriptions such as marital problems or thwarted spiritual development (i.e., if she would submit properly, and he would lead in love, the problem would be solved). These euphemistic descriptions move the abused female away from seeking secular help because the problem is one that should be solved by a religious leader (i.e., their pastor). Unwilling, or unable, to understand the problem through any other lens, their theology functions as ideology, and is more accurately named as *theodeology*.²⁹ Prominent Canadian researcher, Nancy Nason-Clark identified this challenge over two decades ago, yet we continue to smell this particular diplomatic cologne in high concentrations in our work with family violence in southeastern Manitoba. Just as the euphemism “friendly fire” obfuscates the maiming

²⁴ Nancy Nason-Clark, “Has the Silence Been Shattered or Does a Holy Hush Still Prevail?,” in *Bad Pastors: Clergy Misconduct in Modern America*, ed. Anson D. Shupe, Susan E. Darnell, and William A. Stacey (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 78.

²⁵ Irene Sevcik, Michael Rothery, Nancy Nason-Clark, and Robert Pynn, *Overcoming Conflicting Loyalties: Intimate Partner Violence, Community Resources, and Faith* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2015), 38.

²⁶ Quentin Crisp, *Manners from Heaven* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1985), 63.

²⁷ Nancy Nason-Clark, “Shattered Silence or Holy Hush? Emerging Definitions of Violence Against Women in Sacred and Secular Contexts,” *Family Ministry* 13, no. 1 (1999).

²⁸ Nason-Clark, “Shattered Silence or Holy Hush?,” 45.

²⁹ A use of theology to justify an ideology requires a term that makes this process transparent, hence, the term *theodeology*. The entire term “theology” is present in this word, but inserted into the middle is the “ideo.” This neologism mirrors the actual process: when social circumstances or new information on any issue cannot be considered alongside of “reading” the biblical text, that reading risks a cementing that negates the possibility of a faithful reading that is sensitive to time, place, and culture (i.e., inserted into the middle of the theology is a deeply anchored, and often invisible, ideology).

and killing of one's own military colleagues, so too the euphemism of "marital problems" or "spiritual confusion/disobedience" obfuscates the physical harm of a man committing violence against his partner.

Terms often used to describe what many understand as the two main views on female roles in marriage and the church are *complementarian* and *egalitarian*. Given that egalitarians also believe in complementarity (two people building a life together should negotiate tasks and responsibilities based on their respective strengths and interests—their goal is to complement each other's strengths), these terms do not identify the primary distinction between these two positions. The term *complementarian* is a euphemism that hides the hierarchical nature of the complementarian position. The difference between these two positions is that one believes in lateral power (equally shared) while the other believes in hierarchical power (men lead, women follow). Almost without exception, studies examining Christian male violence against their domestic partners identify the teachings of wife submission as functioning to justify that violence.³⁰ By refusing to name the hierarchical power structure of the complementarian position, we are subtly making invisible the power that men hold over women in their marriages. In contexts of wife abuse, these euphemisms function as silencing.

Pastoral Pressures, Unpreparedness, and Compromise

In my work, it is very common to encounter pastors with little or no training in responding to family violence. This too is a common theme in the research. It is also typically the case that pastors are overworked as they attempt to meet the often unrealistic demands of their congregations. The combination of these two stresses often results in family violence situations being virtually ignored or poorly advised, leaving women and children to live in dangerous and debilitating domestic situations. It follows that meaningful support from their church is often absent.

Almost all pastors have counselled women who are experiencing one or more forms of abuse.³¹ In most cases where one form of abuse is present, other forms are present as well. Dealing with family violence is not the exception for most pastors—it's the rule. Because "the rhetoric of strong Christians families has so much popular appeal among religious circles... many pastors find themselves caught between an ideology they are meant to

³⁰ A number of the studies cited in this article are examples.

³¹ Catherine Clark Kroeger, Nancy Nason-Clark, and Barbara Fisher-Townsend, *Beyond Abuse in the Christian Home: Raising Voices for Change* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008).

uphold [denominational theology or congregational expectations] and the violence of men inside their own churches.”³² Pastors consistently report feeling untrained to deal with this violence and report feeling significant pressure to keep these marriages intact (in some cases based on their own beliefs, and in others based on denominational beliefs). They are made to feel that their intervention has failed if the marriage ends in divorce. This places even greater pressure on an abused woman to maintain the “happy Christian family” myth which keeps her and her children in harm’s way. This problem is further compounded by the reality that very few pastors have contact with safe houses or shelters and the resources they offer. Many of the women and children in shelters are being abused by a Christian husband/father who claims that the Bible gives him this right because wives are commanded to submit. A number of the Nason-Clark studies cited in this article indicate that, when a pastor does weigh in with religious language that challenges such interpretations of the biblical text, this carries weight with the abuser. But because secular shelters are frequently viewed with suspicion by pastors and churches, and pastors and churches are frequently viewed with suspicion by shelter workers who often experience pastors pressuring sheltered women to return to dangerously violent homes, the much-needed collaboration between pastors and shelters rarely happens. Many studies call for building “bridges between the steeple and the shelter” to begin reducing the amount of violence in religious homes.³³

Both Genesis House in Winkler, MB, and Agape House in Steinbach, MB, speak of the high need to find pastors who will work directly with women in shelter, or collaboratively with their shelter workers, to support women seeking refuge from family violence. In summary, pastors without family violence response training function, either intentionally or inadvertently, to deepen the silence.

Forgiveness

A central doctrine of Christianity is forgiveness—there is none among us who does not need forgiveness. Survivors of childhood or spousal abuse often report choosing not to speak of their abuse experiences because experience has painfully taught them that forgiving the perpetrator is frequently foremost in those conversations. When forgiveness is suggested by pastors as one of the first tools in dealing with ongoing or past abuse, it

³² Nason-Clark, “Has the Silence Been Shattered?,” 78.

³³ Nancy Nason-Clark, “Christianity and the Experience of Domestic Violence: What Does Faith Have to Do with It?” *Journal of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work* 36, no.4 (2009): 379.

short-circuits the survivor's healing and empowerment process. Appropriate use of restorative justice principles requires, among other things, a victim-centred approach in which the one harmed must be given the resources required to work through the harm, determine what—if any—next steps they wish to take, including whether or not they want contact with the harm-doer.³⁴ Depending on the longevity, severity, and type of abuse, this can take years or decades, or never happen at all. This is one of the dangers of pastors with no appropriate training. Without an understanding of the enormous complexity of abuse recovery, or the nature and impacts of the violation(s), the simplistic approach of calling for forgiveness causes further harm. By focusing on what the victim must do (forgive and submit), the perpetrator is required to do nothing, making the victim the primary agent responsible to change her abuser, rather than the abuser taking responsibility for himself. In such a context, forgiveness functions preemptively to prevent her leaving the marriage and seeking a divorce.

Old Testament scholar Cameron McKenzie points out that “God is the subject of almost all of the forgiving” in the Old Testament; it is rarely interpersonal.³⁵ Even when God forgives, one is not released from the consequences of their actions. David's rape of Bathsheba had harsh generational consequences of infant death, murder, insurrection, family discord and dysfunction, and further sexual assault. While living inside God's forgiveness, David nevertheless also lived inside the consequences of his violence for the rest of his life (2 Sam 11-24). Forgiveness, in a cyclical and typically intensifying family violence situation, is not meaningfully represented by the victim's returning to the marriage. Just as David lived with the costs of his harm-doing, so too must violent perpetrators. In abuse situations, if a pastor holds a preformed ideology of females being secondary, this will be the lens through which forgiveness verses are read and applied. Without a more faithful reading of the biblical text, these types of views function as theologies which cause deep, continued harm.

³⁴ Andrew Wolford and Amanda Nelund, *The Politics of Restorative Justice* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2019); Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (New York: Good Book, 2015).

³⁵ Cameron McKenzie, “BTS-4495/5310: Power, Ethics, Abuse, and Church Leadership,” (class lecture, Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, MB, April 2023).

Contributing Factors to High Rates of Violence in Christian Families

Female Submission

One of the prominent features in the stories I receive is female submission, both as justification for the abuse and the silence that surrounds it. There are hundreds of studies both locally, nationally, and globally, in which this theme of female submission is consistently prominent. For many pastors, divorce is not an option. Instead, the victim of abuse should be more devout, submissive, and “bombard the gates of heaven with prayer... and love the hell out of him.”³⁶ The result of this victim-blaming approach is that Christian women feel torn between the teachings of their church and the personal safety of their children and themselves. Will they obey God, submit, and endure the violence, or will they disobey God and escape the violence? It is a grace-deprived choice. Deaf to the voices of the Old Testament prophets and Jesus’s call to care for the marginalized, the church watches in silence as many women “walk away from the church because they have felt they have to choose between their faith and their lives.”³⁷ A significant portion of evangelical Christian churches continues to adhere to the headship-submission theology of marriage, rather than an egalitarian theology. These theologies are typically presented as binary in nature, often referred to as “camps,” when, in reality, a spectrum is likely a more accurate way to conceive of these differences. While some pastors hold an extreme position on female silence and submission, others hold the opposite view of female voice and equality. But in between is a range that needs to be more robustly acknowledged. The pastor just right of the centre on this spectrum would be considered a “soft” patriarch, while the pastor on the far right would be a “hard” patriarch. We encounter pastors just left of the middle who are not full egalitarians but hold to some egalitarian principles, while pastors furthest to the left would be fully egalitarian. Those closer to the submission end of the continuum are quick to point out that just because one believes in female submission does not mean that one is supportive of wife abuse. And they are right to do so. It would be an irresponsible use of the data to suggest a causal effect between conservative views and violence against Christian women. But it is a responsible use of the data to suggest

³⁶ Kimberly N. Ware, Heidi M. Levitt, and Gary Bayer, “May God Help You: Faith Leaders’ Perspectives of Intimate Partner Violence within Their Communities,” *Journal of Religion and Abuse* 5, no. 2 (2003): 74.

³⁷ Janice Haaken, Holly Fussell, and Eric Mankowski, “Bringing the Church to Its Knees: Evangelical Christianity, Feminism, and Domestic Violence Discourse,” *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 5, no. 2 (2007): 112.

a correlational relationship: the further one moves to the right on the spectrum the higher the rates of violence against women, and the further one moves to the left of the spectrum the lower the rates of violence against women. There is a clear correlation between submission theologies and higher rates of violence against women. This does not preclude someone who holds a strong submission view from robustly defending the right of wives to be free of violence, nor does it preclude the possibility that someone on the far left of the continuum who holds egalitarian views is violent toward their wife. In fact, in our work we have, on rare occasions, seen exactly such cases.

But the preponderance of evidence does indicate that the more conservative the views regarding female submission, the greater the rates of domestic violence. Johanna Harris Tyler, a lecturer at the University of Exeter, observes that “while male headship may not necessarily trip the switch, it can provide the wiring.”³⁸ In interviews conducted with men who abuse their partners, most claim they are not violent. They talk of submission, their God-given male authority, and of how she “pushed his buttons.”³⁹ Men who are controlling in intimate relationships exercise abuse to reinforce submission. Many victims report being told to submit in the name of God while they are being hit, punched, and harmed.⁴⁰ Like the metaphorical Poisonwood Bible in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel of the same name, the words of the biblical text in the mouth of an abuser will cause pain and suffering just as contact with poisonwood does.⁴¹ Andrea Berg, clinical supervisor at Agape House in Steinbach, MB, observes that the many abusers of the Christian women they shelter “have twisted Scripture in such a way that women believe it is OK for men to hurt them,” and that some of the really hard work they do is to attempt to undo how men “have used Scripture to continue abuse.”⁴²

³⁸ Johanna Harris Tyler, “Submission to Your Husband is a Dangerous Doctrine,” ABC News, March 9, 2015, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-09/harris-submission-to-your-husband-is-a-dangerous-doctrine/6290304>.

³⁹ Nason-Clark, “Christianity and the Experience of Domestic Violence,” 385.

⁴⁰ Baird, Julia. “Submit to Your Husbands’: Women Told to Endure Domestic Violence in the Name of God,” ABC News, July 17, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-18/domestic-violence-church-submit-to-husbands/8652028>.

⁴¹ Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 534.

⁴² Andrea Berg, personal interview with author, April 25, 2024.

Teachings on Divorce

Research surveying pastors about attitudes toward divorce indicates that many Christian leaders/pastors believe that divorce is only allowed after desertion or infidelity. Most of them explain that they don't want the children to experience the negative effects of divorce. For them, it is more important to keep the family together than to end the abuse. Significant research has been done on the effects of abuse on children, and there is a clear consensus that whether the child is the victim of family violence, or the witness of family violence, the harmful effects are almost exactly the same. Either way, the child is a victim.⁴³ But because many pastors prioritize an intact marriage over the safety of the wife and children, this functions to silence the women caught in a violent marriage. If the pastor says she should stay for the kids, she is effectively silenced. Braun speaks about the perspective of the conservative Christian women in their shelter who have internalized the belief that they are “married for better or worse—too bad if you got the worst.”⁴⁴ She is troubled to observe that most of these women have so deeply internalized the teachings of their church that they genuinely believe that God does not really love them, they are not as valuable to God as men, and they do not understand themselves as independent beings. In these churches, if such a woman seeks the help of a shelter or removes herself from a violent home, “the pastors then won't pray for her eternal salvation [so] she is also damned to hell.”⁴⁵ From the perspective of the abused wife, she is religiously damned if she does leave and physically damned if she doesn't.

Male Authority

Large segments of the evangelical church are governed primarily by men. It is not unusual to find men occupying almost all of the positions of authority, and not infrequently intentionally blocking women from access to leadership roles.⁴⁶ Men and women who are seeking to change

⁴³ E. Mavis Hetherington and Margaret Stanley-Hagan, “The Adjustment of Children with Divorced Parents: A Risk and Resiliency Perspective,” *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry & Allied Disciplines* 40, no. 1 (January 1999): 129–40; Sandra A. Graham-Bermann and Alytia A. Levendosky, *How Intimate Partner Violence Affects Children: Developmental Research, Case Studies, and Evidence-Based Intervention* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011).

⁴⁴ Angela Braun, personal interview with author, April 25, 2024.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ For example, my colleague, sociologist Dennis Hiebert, was in attendance at an Evangelical Free Church of Canada conference a little over a decade ago where it was announced that a ten-year moratorium on discussing women in leadership had been put in

this in their churches are often stigmatized and marginalized. Imagine, for a moment, that you are a woman living with violence, feeling the shame of a “failed” idealized Christian family, likely sexually abused as well, facing condemnation about divorce, yet desperate to protect yourself and your children. It would be enormously difficult to speak about this violence to a male pastor who you already know will tell you to pray more, submit more, and forgive. What would be the odds that you would tell a male pastor who carries all the entitlements granted by patriarchy, and the theological power to control and disapprove of your desire to escape the violence? Not good.

Breaking the Holy Hush

Berg offers a very straightforward approach to breaking the holy hush: “You either stand up against abuse, or you are supporting it.”⁴⁷ Silence on this issue is not neutrality, it’s complicity. Both Braun and Berg speak of the crucial need for pastors and churches to become part of the solution. They intuitively recognize that “abuse of any kind does not take place in a social vacuum. It is culturally and historically framed.”⁴⁸ A significant segment of churches within evangelicalism have framed and formed a context in which high levels of family violence are enabled in our own backyards. An important approach to changing this subculture, according to Nason-Clark, is to build bridges between the secular and sacred communities.⁴⁹ In order to effect change in the theodeologies that function to harm vulnerable women and children, we must be willing to steep theologies in the realities on the ground, seek knowledge and skills from those trained in responding to abuse, and educate to prevent it. Pastors need to be equipped in their seminaries before they enter ministry, rather than scrambling to equip themselves after they are in ministry. Congregations must be educated by their leadership. The time of reckoning has come, and with it, the need to “[explore] the great, shifting terrain between righteousness and what’s right.”⁵⁰ The women and children who are victims of family violence cannot break through the holy hush until we do.

place.

⁴⁷ Andrea Berg, personal interview with author, April 25, 2024.

⁴⁸ Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmon, “The Relationship Between Spiritual Abuse and Domestic Violence and Abuse in Faith-Based Communities,” in *Domestic Violence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Protection, Prevention, and Intervention*, ed. Sarah Hilder and Vanessa Bettinson (London: Macmillan, 2016), 204.

⁴⁹ McMullin, Nason-Clark, Fisher-Townsend, and Holtmann, “When Violence Hits the Religious Home,” 115.

⁵⁰ Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, x.