



# When women speak: domestic violence in Australian churches



**ST MARK'S**  
REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT & OPINION



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# When women speak:

## domestic violence in Australian churches



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# St Mark's Review

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# Editorial

On an ordinary Tuesday in July 2017, my morning class examined the critical role of eyewitness testimony in the story of Jesus Christ. The role of women recorded as the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection remains one of the more remarkable features of the origins of Christianity. Later that evening I watched on the ABC's 7:30 the harrowing testimony of several women's experiences of domestic violence within the church. I noticed my own response as I listened to their testimony: these women are so brave; their story is difficult to hear (it must also be difficult to recount); what should I do with their testimony? What should happen to these women? I suppose it is likely that the responses of the first disciples to the testimony that Jesus had risen from the dead were similar to my own. Even though some of the men were too slow to believe the eyewitness testimony (remember doubting Thomas?), even though their Jewish laws and culture forbade women from giving testimony in court, even though their world (and ours) was about to be turned upside down history confirms that the unlikely testimony of the women was deemed credible. Yet no one could have predicted the ensuing discussion and debate, which sidelined the testimony of those brave women.

Julia Baird, the ABC reporter who led the investigations by interviewing hundreds of women, provides a first-hand account of the bizarre weeks that followed in the lead article of this journal issue, "Data Thy Neighbour". Baird recalls how "we wrote and published more than 25,000 words that week—with a depth and length increasingly unusual in mainstream media, including protocols and sermons and analysis—and yet were being criticized . . . It was bizarre." The impact of these debates is poignantly underlined with Baird's admission that, "I have never in my professional career seen the voices of so many women dismissed: academics, psychologists, theologians, church workers, lawyers, reporters, and leaders."

In the next essay, I offer a biblical and theological account of why words matter. Credibility. It is in short supply in politics, on social media, and in the church. At a personal level, it is one of those invisible privileges many of us reading this simply presume: that our word will be believed. For example, I am well educated, and so are a lot of the people reading this. I have held five

full-time jobs over the last thirty years and I have learned the importance of being persuasive in the classroom and the congregation. I am rarely discriminated against. I expect to be treated fairly and with respect by students and employers, the police, and other authorities. Furthermore, I know what action I can take if I am not. I know my word will be believed. This is what it means to be credible: to know that your words will be believed. In my essay, I demonstrate how speaking and listening, wisdom, and integrity are woven together in Scripture and inform a theological interpretation of credibility.

Naomi Priest, Associate Professor at the Australian National University, provides a health and social science perspective on current learnings and future steps by reviewing and critiquing the “available data regarding domestic and family violence and violence against women in Australian churches and in the context of responses to the Baird and Gleeson report.” The expert analysis busts many of the myths and misinformation that surrounded the data used in Baird and Gleeson’s reporting. Priest offers four recommendations that include addressing the “sexism, patriarchy, gender, and inequalities deeply embedded across all sections of society and of churches.”

Shane Clifton, a theologian within the Pentecostal tradition, exposes the issues of power and submission in his essay, “Spirit, submission, power, and abuse”. Clifton’s critical gaze is directed not merely at those who insist on male headship in the church, but it also addresses the “Pentecostal gender paradox”. Clifton observes hopefully that “Pentecostal and charismatic churches are well placed to be leaders of change” with a Spirit-led feminism that brings forgiveness and grace.

Nicky Lock, lecturer in Pastoral Counselling and Professional Supervision at St Mark’s National Theological Centre, reminds us of the “disturbing fact of there being little apparent change in the experiences of women regarding violence in church over a thirty year period,” which provides the impetus for the next essay. Lock argues that “the failure to the church to respond effectively and lovingly has been contributed to by a comprehensive experience of shame that has caused silencing of persons who experience domestic violence.” Lock concludes by noting how a willingness to “face the shame of this scourge . . . has stimulated a restorative and reparative reaction in churches”. St Mary’s House in Sydney is one practical example of that restorative and reparative action of the church (see below).

Erica Hamence, Assistant Minister at St Barnabas Anglican Church, Broadway asks, what does making the church safer look like? Provocatively,

Hamence suggest that asking the question, “is the church safe?” or, “is *this* church safe?”—with the assumption that safety is a static binary—reveals that we may be more invested in our own comfort and reassurance than we are in the lived experience of those who have experienced domestic violence. Addressing some of the same issues of power and its abuse as Clifton does in his earlier essay, Hamence explores the cultures of power within the local church context and outlines how “power-blindness” can mean “abuse-blindness”. Again, the question of credibility arises as Hamence discusses how the resource “Safer”—developed for local churches by Common Grace—informs “Christians (leaders and lay members) about the dynamics of [domestic violence], and the ways that our common beliefs might intersect with or challenge those dynamics.”

Andrew Errington, ethics lecturer and Academic Dean of Vocational Education and Training at St Mark’s National Theological Centre, challenges the dynamics of male violence with his essay, “A theological reflection on Genesis 4:19–24”. He insists that “an abusive husband can only ask his wife to forgive him if he is willing to become vulnerable to her in proportion to his offenses.” To do otherwise is to misunderstand the nature of forgiveness. Errington offers instead “the guidance and the grace of the one on whom Lamech’s shadow did not fall, and who carved out a new vision for men, and for women.”

The grace of Jesus Christ is practically embodied in the safe place called Mary’s House. Liz Mackinlay, the Chair of Mary’s House, narrates its story of addressing a three-fold challenge: “create a safe place for women and children escaping intimate partner violence in our local area, mobilise our community to support the service both financially and non-financially, and create a positive conversation on the lower north shore of Sydney that focussed on saying ‘we don’t accept domestic violence in our community.’” Cautioning that “fairy tales don’t exist”, Mackinlay’s essay nevertheless testifies to the overwhelming “generosity of a vast host of community, corporate and individual supporters who we call our Mary’s House family.” Is the wider church capable of rising to such a challenge of grace and generosity?

Graeme Anderson, senior pastor from Northside Baptist Church and convener of “Time to Listen” in late 2017, provides the final essay on this “sorry business” by insisting that “talking only works if we are also willing to listen.” The church must relinquish its double pride: the desperation to be right but also the determination to do it alone. Anderson rightly understands

this as a “Come to Jesus” moment for the church, demanding both repentance and faith. Baird suggests that repentance is where “the instinct of the church must shift from protecting reputations to protecting the vulnerable.” All the contributors to this special edition of *St Mark's Review* share this instinct.

Repentance and faith can restore the credibility problem the church has with vulnerable people such as those experiencing domestic violence. As the church's culture changes so that a woman's testimony is treated equally to a man's, can the church regain its public credibility? Some reading this will not think that likely or possible. Resurrection stories have always been difficult to believe. The women's testimony that first Easter morning was deemed credible. Their word was believed. Everything changed. “Boys clubs” (whether ancient Roman and Jewish, or contemporary Australian and Christian) did and must change when a “girl's story” is believed.

**Geoff Broughton**  
Guest editor



# A note on terminology

Various terms are used to describe domestic violence, including “domestic and family abuse,” “domestic abuse,” and “intimate partner violence.” Each offers different nuances, but in the interests of consistency with common scholarly usage this issue of *St Mark’s Review* adopts the term “domestic violence.” This is the term used by the Australian Government to refer to most forms of abuse and is in conformity with the following definition adopted by the Australian Government’s *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Children, 2010–2022* (2014):

Violence against women can be described in many different ways, and laws in each state and territory have their own definitions.

The term violence against women means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

United Nations Declaration on the  
Elimination of Violence against Women

Domestic violence refers to acts of violence that occur between people who have, or have had, an intimate relationship. While there is no single definition, the central element of domestic violence is an ongoing pattern of behaviour aimed at controlling a partner through fear, for example by using behaviour which is violent and threatening. In most cases, the violent behaviour is part of a range of tactics to exercise power and control over women and their children, and can be both criminal and noncriminal.

Domestic violence includes physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse. Physical violence can include slaps, shoves, hits, punches, pushes, being thrown down stairs

or across the room, kicking, twisting of arms, choking, and being burnt or stabbed.

Sexual assault or sexual violence can include rape, sexual assault with implements, being forced to watch or engage in pornography, enforced prostitution, and being made to have sex with friends of the perpetrator.

Psychological and emotional abuse can include a range of controlling behaviours such as control of finances, isolation from family and friends, continual humiliation, threats against children or being threatened with injury or death.

Family violence is a broader term that refers to violence between family members, as well as violence between intimate partners. It involves the same sorts of behaviours as described for domestic violence. As with domestic violence, the National Plan recognises that although only some aspects of family violence are criminal offences, any behaviour that causes the victim to live in fear is unacceptable. The term, “family violence” is the most widely used term to identify the experiences of Indigenous people, because it includes the broad range of marital and kinship relationships in which violence may occur.<sup>1</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 Council of Australian Governments (COAG), *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Children, 2010–2022*, [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08\\_2014/national\\_plan1.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf), accessed March 20, 2018.