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# THE PERCEPTIONS OF CLERGY ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE KWAZULU-NATAL MIDLANDS

## ABSTRACT

*The issue of domestic violence is not a private matter. It inadvertently affects all members of society, including service professionals who assist victims and perpetrators. Among those inflicting violence are members of the Christian community, despite their orthopraxy that condemns violence. Some believe that clergy, the “shepherds of the flock”, play a pivotal role in fostering attitudes that either condone or condemn violence in society. Subjugating women restricts them from reaching their full potential. An understanding of the ways in which clergy manage institutionalised systems of dominance may lead to a cultural shift that does not tolerate dominance by one over another. This qualitative study uses a Feminist Liberation Theology framework<sup>1</sup> to explore the perceptions of clergy from the Midlands region of KwaZulu-Natal on the issue of dealing with domestic violence in the Christian community.*

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- 1 Due to the fact that this qualitative study used a Feminist Liberation Theology framework – although we admit that other theoretical perspectives could make valuable contributions to a similar study – it falls outside the specific focus of this particular study. Future studies can benefit from extending the theoretical scope to include, for instance, liberation theory. The Feminist Liberation Theology theoretical framework serves, among others, the purpose of consciousness raising, a position also taken by Liberation Theology (Schüssler Fiorenza 1975; Ruether 1993; Ackermann 1996; Dreyer 2011; Morkel (2012; 2015).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Multiple terms for domestic abuse have been used interchangeably, including terms such as “intimate partner violence”, “spousal abuse”, “battered women”, “family violence”, “wife abuse” and, more recently, “gender violence”. Lockton and Ward (1997:1) suggest that the term “domestic violence”, as used in this article, encompasses a wider form of relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. The South African Domestic Violence Act No. 116 of 1998 defines domestic violence as:

Physical abuse, sexual abuse; emotional verbal and psychological abuse; economic abuse; intimidation; harassment; stalking; damage to property; entering into the complainant’s residence without consent where the parties do not share the same residence; and any other controlling or abusive behaviour towards a complainant where such conduct harms, or may cause immediate harm to, the safety, health or well-being of the complainant.

Although the topic of domestic violence in the Christian community is well researched, empirical studies focusing on the intersection of religion and domestic violence present contrasting reports on how clergy handle reported incidents of domestic violence. This highlights that clergy’s religious interventions can either hinder or help those experiencing domestic violence. An understanding of the ways in which clergy manage institutionalised systems of dominance may lead to a cultural shift that does not tolerate dominance by one over another.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the introduction of the South African Domestic Violence Act of 1998, domestic violence in South Africa continues to escalate (Van der Hoven 2001; Walker 2005) and also features in the Christian community, despite their orthopraxy that condemns violence. Tracy (2006:281) comments that “[domestic] violence in Christian homes appears to mirror the high rates of the general society”. If 85.7% of the South African population are reported by StatisticsSA (2015:33) as affiliated to the Christian religion, how do we explain this carnage of women and children?

In a national survey on the nature of, and response to violence against women, Rasool *et al.* (2002:99) report that 20% of women in South Africa sought help from a religious minister after a serious incident of domestic violence, whereas Phiri (2002), Nason-Clark (2008) and Holtmann (2011) suggest that women of faith consult clergy after experiencing domestic violence. In dealing with domestic violence, Alsdurf and Alsdurf (1989), Bowker (1988) as well

as Shannon-Lewy and Dull (2005) report that clergy's religious interventions can help, but also hinder both victims and perpetrators. Fortune (1991) adds that some clergy counsel with the aim of preserving holy matrimony and, in the process, undermine the woman's worth and healing. Coupled with the "holy hush" from the church (Nason-Clark 2008) and the pressure to project exemplary happy Christian homes – what Joyce (2009) terms the "[b]iblical battered wife syndrome" – this could influence women to conceal the abuse they experience. Domestic violence, however, may also affect men who are battered by their intimate partners, as suggested by Steinmetz's (1977:499-509) "battered husband syndrome."

To determine clergy's perceptions of domestic violence, as well as what they believe the role of the church<sup>2</sup> should be on the issue of domestic violence, this qualitative study explores the following research question: How do clergy from the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands region approach the reported incidents of domestic violence among the congregations they serve? Semi-structured interviews with clergy were used to establish how incidents of domestic violence are reported and attended to in the various congregations. This includes establishing what clergy believe were some of the socio-economic and cultural factors that influenced their approach to domestic violence in the communities they serve.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist Liberation Theology's theoretical framework was used to explore clergy's perceptions of domestic violence in the Christian community. Feminist Liberation Theology promotes consciousness-raising as a strategy for bringing about awareness of taken-for-granted assumptions of androcentric church practices (Schüssler Fiorenza 1975:616). Conscientisation is a process whereby one learns to "name" and "change one's situation" (Freire 1970:100). Feminist theologians challenge patriarchal social practices that perpetuate the subordination of women (Ackermann 1996). However, Campbell (1992:19) and Dutton (1994:167) suggest that there is no evidence that patriarchy perpetuates violence against women, as implied by feminists. Dreyer (2011:2) argues that, instead of enabling women to flourish, Christianity has contributed to the restriction of women by encouraging them to "self-sacrifice" for the sake of others. On the other hand, Snyder-Hall's (2008) study gives evidence of women who consciously choose to uphold wifely submission. It is, therefore,

2 Derived from the Greek word *kyriakon*, meaning "house of the Lord". It is a compound of two words, *kyrios*, meaning the Lord, and *oikas*, meaning house. The term was used to refer to houses of Christian worship since c.300, especially in the East. The New Testament refers to the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means a calling out – an assembly or "local society of believers" (Online Etymology Dictionary).

evident that the issue of domestic violence in the Christian community transcends common viewpoints of binary oppositions of male/female to include other contextual factors. Women's experiences should not be generalised, but should be understood from the locus of intersecting variables such as, among other influences, race, class and education (Crenshaw 1993; Björkgren 2004). For this reason, this study sought to determine the perceptions of the clergy in addressing the unique circumstances of different women who experience domestic violence.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This explorative study made use of orientational qualitative inquiry, deploying a feminist perspective (Patton 1990; 2002). The maximum variation sampling method (Patton 1990:182; 2002:234-235) was used to establish patterns of commonalities that emerged from a sample that had been purposefully chosen for its diversity and polarity. Patterns of commonalities that emerge from the diversity suggest issues that are valuable to all respondents. At the same time, each case is described in depth (Patton 1990; 2002). De Gruchy (2004) suggests the necessity of understanding the cultural and social setting of the people who need care. The StatisticsSA (2015) report; the Msunduzi Municipality (2007; 2009:17) reports; the KwaZulu-Natal Treasury Department (2014/2015:18) report, as well as McCarthy's (2006:20) position paper were used to establish the socio-economic standing of the communities, from which a sample of twelve clerical respondents were drawn. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were used as the data-gathering instrument. Interviews were conducted in different settings that were convenient to respondents. Two digital audio-recorders were used to record the in-depth interviews. Audio recordings were downloaded directly into Atlas.ti. 7.5.7. computer-assisted qualitative-data-analysis software (CAQDAS). A thematic data analysis method that makes use of constant comparison techniques was employed for data analysis (Henning *et al.* 2004; Braun & Clarke 2006; Schurink *et al.* 2011).

#### 5. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

##### 5.1 Duration of post-ordination experience

A total of twelve clergy participated in the study. The number of years of practising as a cleric post-ordination ranged from six months to thirty-five years. The average number of years of experience post-ordination was 17.54 years.

## 5.2 Marital status of respondents

Eleven of the respondents were married, and one respondent was single.

## 5.3 Type of theology training received

Eight respondents attended seminary; two received university in-service theology training; one received training from Bible College, and one received in-church training.

## 5.4 Educational levels of respondents

Eight of the twelve respondents hold Bachelor of Theology degrees (two with postgraduate Master degrees); one respondent holds a Bachelor of Education degree; one respondent has a Grade 12+ National Certificate, and two respondents hold other professional qualifications.

## 5.5 Number of respondents who received training in domestic violence

Eight of the respondents did not receive any training in domestic violence, whereas four respondents indicated that they received some training in domestic violence, such as a morning workshop. Of these four, one attended trauma counselling and believed that domestic violence counselling is similar to any other trauma counselling.

## 5.6 Years with current congregation

The minimum years that clergy in this article spent with their current congregation was six months; the average was 10.04 years, whereas the maximum time with their current congregation was thirty-five years.

## 6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study might be subject to selection bias, due to the difficulty in recruiting clergy to participate in a study on such a sensitive matter. More clergy chose not to respond to the invitation to participate than those who agreed to participate in the study. The use of a Snowball Referral System might have made the recruitment efforts easier. However, this study was interested in views from diverse respondents from various communities and church denominations. The article was unable to include clergy from African indigenous churches, as their clerics, who expressed willingness to participate, postponed all the scheduled appointments within the time frame of the study.

Over half of the respondents did not receive formal training in domestic violence. This trend is similar to studies conducted in Durban (Phiri 2002)

and the Western Cape (Petersen 2006), which suggest that some pastors are not trained professional marriage counsellors. However, Glanville and Dreyer (2013:9) suggest that, apart from pastoral training, commitment, time and sacrifice, clergy's "gifts of the Holy Spirit", described as "encouragement, mercy, wisdom, etc." could add value to victims of violence. Ideally, domestic violence should be studied contextually and transdisciplinarily, as suggested by Thesnaar (2011:34). Shannon-Lewy and Dull (2005:657) state that "is frustrating that little research has been done in terms of helping clerics better help victims of domestic violence". Different strategies for the prevention and management of domestic violence, therefore, need further exploration.

## 7. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings on clergy's perceptions and management of incidents of domestic violence among the congregations they serve in the Midlands region of KwaZulu-Natal are presented in three sections, delineating some of the respondents' compelling narratives: How clergy find out or hear of domestic violence in their congregation. How clergy deal with domestic violence once they become aware thereof. The solutions clergy offer to domestic violence.

### 7.1 Section one: How clergy find out or hear of domestic violence in their congregation

When asked how they identified or learnt of domestic violence incidents in their congregation, the clergy related different stories.

#### 7.1.1 Reporting of domestic violence to clergy

Contrary to suggestions by Holtmann (2011) that, for many Christian women, clergy serve as the first port of call after experiencing domestic violence, some of the narrations in this article suggest that clergy might not necessarily be the first port of call. Respondent five explained that, in most of the instances, the *makoti* (daughter-in-law) calls upon her family-in-law for help, as cultural practice expects the in-laws to guide their son when he strays. On the same thread, but with reference to an affluent community, respondent ten articulated that

[i]t is more probably about how you hear about it or how much it is spoken about and maybe how much it comes to the surface ... People are very reluctant to even approach me to come to talk about it ... If I can make a comparison with my congregation in [xyz], I had people and families knocking at my door, so it was really in my face. So there is quite a comparison there and there is quite a difference. That is what I have found here, that your English folks have a stiff-upper-lip that on

the surface things look good, but you realise as you get down that that's not necessarily the case.

Seven of the twelve respondents narrated how they heard “rumblings” of trouble, not from the victims themselves, but from their friends and family. Mitchell's (2003) study, which examines the nature of assistance to victims of domestic violence offered by the police force in Lenasia, South Africa, reports that the extended family and in-laws are the first point of consultation after a couple experience disharmony. One could argue that this initial family consultation may affect the effectiveness of the clergy's assistance, as it prolongs the time between the first incident of domestic violence and the consultation with the clergy. If indeed victims discuss their marital problems with their family and friends first, when do victims approach the clergy? Is it after the abuse gets worse or is it after they have been nudged by their friends and family? Two respondents mentioned that, once they have learnt through the grapevine about victims of abuse, they usually create opportunities to interact with the victims in the hope of establishing communication.

## 7.2 Section two: How the clergy deal with domestic violence once they become aware thereof

With regard to how clergy handle domestic violence once they become aware thereof, a finding of this article suggests that the nature of the community served by the cleric may influence the extent to which the clergy can play an active role in handling domestic violence, as suggested by the following examples.

### 7.2.1 Receptiveness to clergy's counsel

Respondent four emphasised the fact that communities should realise that pastors are not super-human beings and do not have “supernatural powers”, to use his words. He articulated as follows:

I usually get called in on the basis – generally speaking – it's more on a superstitious level – there is something going on in our marriage. Like there is some mysterious forces at work here, and when I do get in and conversation happens, then I begin to discover other things. I think in the three or four cases that I have covered, there has been physical abuse.

This illustrates possible tension in a family that attributes domestic violence to a supernatural force; yet, the minister recognises their domestic situation as physical abuse that needs to be directly addressed. He expressed quiet resignation to the fact that some members of the community attribute marital disharmony to “spiritual forces”, stating

I think that in the Christian community there is something – that little religious thing – that condones violence and abuse, but sometimes we don't address it and we spiritualize it, take the spiritual root to the problem. You need to address it. You have an abusive husband and he needs counselling or he needs therapy.

On further investigation after the interview, it became clear that, compared with the remainder of the communities included in this article, this pastor serves a community that is overwhelmed with advertisements on social media by Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches featuring the words “miracle” and “revival”, including invitations to the next “miracle revival”.

On the issue of receptiveness to clergy's counsel, all the respondents lamented the fact that they can only advise and not compel congregants to behave in a particular way. Respondent six pointed out that

God created you with intellect and WILL (said with emphasis). If you don't use your intellect to judge, then even a good pastor will tell you something in the Church and if you are going to do harm – you will.

He added that some victims of domestic violence experience psychosomatic symptoms, but do not seek help from clergy, because

a pastor is a second[-]hand person who you do not even use ... a psychologist will take more money from you and encourage you to come back, whereas a pastor, you may not pay the pastor (chuckle).

## 7.2.2 Counselling approaches of victims and perpetrators

Another finding is that the respondents' approach to counselling differs. Indigenous African counselling therapy expects extended family members, especially family elders, to counsel troubled couples (Sodi *et al.* 2010). Five of the respondents asked victims for permission to consult their extended family, in order to synergise Christian with indigenous counselling methods. One respondent related that his initial efforts of communication with a perpetrator were fruitless until he asked the victim to call the perpetrator's uncle to attend the next intervention session. This session was the first time that the perpetrator opened his mouth. Another respondent stated that he and his wife preferred to get to know a few of the extended family members of their congregants, so that they can be more effective in handling marital issues that may arise. One respondent lamented that family bonds have been eroded, as men seek work in urban areas and mines.



Respondent eleven raised the challenges of counselling with the intention of preserving the marriage. One day, he was summoned to the local police station. A young man, whom he had been counselling, had been arrested for alleged domestic violence. The young man immediately told the pastor: "Pastor, don't ask me why I am here, you said I must be patient and hang in there." Respondent eleven had indeed advised the young man to "hang in there", while they worked through his marital issues. After a disagreement, the young man's wife called the police, who immediately placed the young man in a holding cell, even though the court of law found him not guilty. Circumstantial evidence saw the young man gaining custody of their young child. While all the respondents view divorce as a serious matter, they also view it as the only possible course of action, in some instances. This finding is contrary to some of the reports by Alsdurf and Alsdurf (1988), Fortune (1991) and Nason-Clark (2009) that clergy view their intervention as unsuccessful, if a marriage ends in divorce. The vast majority of the respondents agreed that each case is unique, and that counselling should take the specifics into account. One respondent insisted on counselling partners together, since he needs to hear both sides of the story. This method differs from clinicians Rotunda *et al.* (2004), who assert that, ideally, victims and perpetrators should be counselled separately until an appropriate time.

### 7.2.3 Addressing women's self-worth

Clergy serving the affluent communities emphasise building the victims' self-esteem, compared with low-income communities, where the clergy discusses basic survival and physiological issues, emulating Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs theory. For example, respondent ten, who serves an affluent region, articulated the following:

I am thinking of the many counselling sessions that I have had in helping women recognise who they are in God's eyes and that what's happening to them, uum, is their feelings about themselves, they have been told a hundred things about how bad they are and whatever else and they end up being abused differently ... So, it's about building up a woman's self-esteem and recognising her role and her place and who she is – you know.

By contrast, respondent five, who serves a low-income community that is a mere 7.2 km (of hilly terrain) from the affluent community served by respondent ten, narrated examples that imply that, when a woman experiences domestic violence, she will seek another man to live with, suggesting a need for shelter. He thus warns abusive men that, "[at] the time that you are chasing her away, you are selling her to other people." Other examples provided by this respondent suggest cohabitant arrangements that could be investigated

in a different study. It may be argued that women, who are in a cohabiting relationship, are more likely to be “chased away” than women who are formally married.

### 7.2.4 Referring victims for professional help

Nine respondents stated that they do not hesitate to refer victims and perpetrators to relevant professionals such as psychologists and social workers. However, two Pentecostal respondents stated that they prefer to only refer to professionals who have a Christian background, whereas one respondent (Evangelical) attributed domestic violence to evil forces that the Church can handle internally. The sentiments of the three who prefer to handle matters of domestic violence in the church system are similar to reports by Wood and McHugh (1994:187) as well as Alsdurf and Alsdurf (1989) of clergy’s ambivalence on the dilemma of offering secular solutions versus theological dogma. Whipple (1987) suggests that fundamentalist churches are not keen on having their members seek help from outside the church. Respondents six and seven highlighted some of the different viewpoints expressed apropos involving secular professionals. Respondent seven emphasised the following:

Obviously, it must be a Christian psychologist or Christian counsellor. You want to give people Christian help (pause), the psychologist must be Christian because of the reference point, what is the basis of the non-Christians to help people that are in crises?

On the contrary, respondent six stated:

Christianity is not lived in isolation ... if you are a Christian you have ecumenism ... But ecumenism also can extend to Hindus and Muslims, because they all work for the good of the society. Let me give you one good example, the kind of problem we have as Christians – that is the question of alcoholism, drugs ... You don’t find most of them in Islam society. But the Islam also live in society.

All the respondents reported that they would not hesitate to advise and help victims to report to the police when victims’ safety was compromised.

### 7.2.5 Cultural aspects of domestic violence

Nine of the twelve respondents related narratives from which one can easily identify the influence of patriarchal social arrangements. Respondent three explained that

the African religion is based on the male ... In the Zulu society it is the male who talks to the ancestors, the father of the house and he teaches

his son and it goes down to that is why it is difficult for the male to be converted as he is the priest of the house.

Respondent five, who serves and lives in a township, also gave examples of a patrilineal inheritance system and male privilege. Another respondent articulated the following:

If within the culture a man is allowed to take around 20 wives ... and if a man can marry a girl who is very young and the man is so old, that is a violation of that very girl. That goes as domestic violence.

When asked how the Christian community might address some of these practices that lead to the subjugation of women, respondent three stated that

Christianity is a way of living ... I always tell the people in my congregation that you volunteer to come here ... So you can't bring your cultural thing and say your grandparents of 100 years old ... no you choose Christianity, live as a Christian.

The various narratives confirm Schüssler Fiorenza's (1996:163) statement:

[an] understanding of patriarchy solely in terms of male supremacy and misogynist sexism is not able to articulate the interaction of racism, classism and sexism in Western militarist societies.

Some of these patriarchal cultural practices are similar to those discussed in the anthology, *Living with dignity: African perspectives on gender equality* (Mouton *et al.* 2015). Clergy from the Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches tended to attribute domestic violence to spiritual forces as opposed to mainstream-church clergy. An Evangelic respondent believed that a "docile" male member of his congregation, who was "bullied by the wife", was under the spell of *muti* from his wife who was "even older than him"; sorcery was also behind the perpetrator's refusal to accept help from the cleric. These findings suggest that the church does not work in isolation. Therefore, the cultural values observed by communities have to be understood. This view is in line with Nason-Clark's (2004:304) suggestion that "[condemnation] of domestic violence requires both the language of contemporary culture and the language of the spirit". Although clergy share aspects that influenced how they handle domestic violence, they all hold the common view that domestic violence is not only physical, but also includes cultural, emotional, financial and psychological aspects that have a negative impact on society. Clergy who attribute domestic violence to *muti*/sorcery are calling in mind Zulu's (2015) call for the re-evaluation of some of the African cultural practices that include beliefs in witchcraft.

### 7.2.6 Addressing silence in the church

The respondents were aware of some congregants' reluctance to discuss marital problems. As such, clergy use different platforms, for example, small group meetings such as mothers' fellowship/union, men's fellowship and cell groups to encourage intimate interaction among congregants. One may question the effectiveness of such platforms considering respondent eight's comment:

I think there are so many situations, so many people that are playing through that making women stay, the children, the community – what are people thinking, as much as we tell people, don't worry about what other people think ... Are you dressed accordingly, do you act accordingly, everything that we do is dictated by how other people think of us, isn't it?

Knickmeyer *et al.*'s (2010) paper entitled "Putting on Sunday best: The silencing of battered women within Christian faith communities" alerts us to the high probability of women not revealing all that happens at home, in order to be seen as living exemplary Christian lives.

The vast majority of the respondents expressed reluctance to address domestic violence from the pulpit, citing the presence of children in the congregation as a deterrent. They are of the opinion that the subject is sensitive and should be addressed at appropriate fora such as couple's seminars. Two of the respondents from affluent communities believed that they do not have to preach on domestic violence, as it was irrelevant in their context, but they would do so, should they notice a need. Instead, they monitor their congregants through home visits, lay minister reports, and family get-togethers. According to Tracy (2007:1),

[Of] all the social problems confronted by the Church, domestic violence is surely one of the most misunderstood and mismanaged by Church leaders.

Tracy describes how he, as a young pastor, was under the false impression that domestic violence did not exist in his own church.

All the respondents mentioned home visits, although respondent four expressed his concern about being perceived as "intruding" in his affluent community, which he described as "closed". He added that members of the lower socio-economic congregation that he also serves are more receptive and "open" to him, so that he never feels as though he is intruding there. He referred to the example of an affluent couple whom he tried to assist until they stopped consulting him and separated. During the period of separation, he noticed that the wife blossomed and flourished. When the couple later

reconciled, the respondent describes how, from the pulpit, he watched the woman “shrink” again. He then commented:

Now I am in a dilemma, a total dilemma, do I go knocking on her door and say hey what’s going on ... I sort of say, how are you doing – you don’t come around – and you get the walls being built up (use of hands drawing imaginary walls in the air). It is very difficult – but you want to get in. On a few occasions where I have actually managed to make a break-through – ironically it’s been more of the men.

The above narratives highlight clergy’s dilemma of being seemingly intrusive, while discreetly wishing to attend to the injuries of those in their congregation.

### 7.2.7 Role of women in the church and family

Respondents were asked their views on the status of women in the church and in families. Respondent twelve contributed that he is not sure why, at church social gatherings, “[the] Indian and African people” always have men gravitating to one side and women to another, thus reinforcing segregation by gender, whereas he observes that, “[W]hite men and women” mix freely. Eight of the twelve respondents indicated that they have women in leadership positions in their church and the other four do not. Two of these eight pointed out that they do not accept women into these positions. Respondent nine stated:

In our Church we cannot have women leaders. If she stands by herself (pointing to his wife who is also in ministry with him) it will be hard by herself. She can’t go to stand in the rural areas ... the men there can’t allow the women to go to stand there. If you are putting her there it’s like you are putting her in fire ... she preaches better than me, she has a better gift, that’s not a problem, the Scripture doesn’t allow that (laugh) (pause). No scripture doesn’t. Timothy 3 – the qualification of the elder or Bishop should be the man.

The above narration is in line with Owino’s (2010:156) comment of

[a theology] of hierarchy where we have God-male-female; establishing discourses of ‘maleness’ where women no longer stand in direct relation to God.

Respondent seven explained that

it must be the MEN [said with emphasis] in our congregation that take leadership. We don’t have women in leadership roles in our Church. That’s a long debate that in our own Church ... for the simple reason that we cannot make what is happening outside the Church – cannot be

principal of what is happening in Church. We are always thinking, what is the will of God in this situation.

When asked whether the “supportive role” expected of women did not create conditions that constrain women from reaching their full potential, one of the respondents stated:

If [a man] is called to lead then he must set the example ... But you must understand his own unique task in guiding his family, and woman is there to support him. But once again if she doesn't support, it's like a bridge, then it will collapse.

Respondent ten saw things differently:

They've been told (men) from a young age, from the culture of nurturing, especially in the more conservative Church culture ... there is that model that I think for men this is what they have grown up with and then to realise that this is not how it is meant to be they are threatened, especially when they are faced with a partner who is more competent. The Church can exacerbate that problem, especially from the conservative view point of the Church of the man being the head of the house, which I think needs to be clarified very clearly.

The respondents whose churches do not allow women leadership bring to mind the experiences of Morkel (2012:8, 9; 2015) in the Dutch Reformed Church, where “only men filled the “kerkraadbanke” (pews of the Church Council). Morkel was frustrated by the restrictive opportunities for women to contribute and develop their gifts within the leadership structures of the Dutch Reformed Church branch of which she was a member. Restraining women from church leadership is an example of how patriarchy indirectly influences both men and women to “self-regulate” in the same way as prisoners in a circular panopticon prison. Foucault (1997) explains that institutional power is never forced as such, but simply internalised. Therefore, one fails to live to one's full potential within the confines of structures such as patriarchal systems.

## 7.2.8 Issues of safety raised by clergy

Respondent ten highlighted clergy's need for safety. He related that a victim had once called him in the middle of the night, asking for help, because her husband was beating her. Having only being recently ordained, he jumped out of bed and rushed to the victim's aid. Reminiscing, he now realises that he should either have advised the victim to call the police in the interim, or he should have been accompanied by someone. He now has the opportunity of calling the in-house social worker of the church for advice. Laughing at how naïve he had been, he added that, should a similar incident happen nowadays,

I would take someone with me to be a witness of what goes on because you can get accused of this and that. So it's not wise to go on your own. I think it's wise to go with someone and maybe call the social worker or police – you have to weigh it out.

### 7.3 Section three: Solutions offered by clergy

There were mixed reactions on what clergy thought should be done to initiate a cultural shift that promotes women's worth. The reactions also stemmed from the different church denomination doctrines guiding the clergy, as well as from their understanding of the ground-level realities. Their understanding of concomitant factors of domestic violence is in line with Louw's (2012) advocacy for *cura vitae*, which suggests that healing cannot be separated from the realities of suffering. For example, while this study is about domestic violence, unemployment and alcohol abuse featured prominently as factors that negatively influence family dynamics and impact on the extent of the clergy's effectiveness. Clergy who serve townships and rural areas mentioned the word "poverty" the most, whereas clergy who serve the lower middle-class communities mostly mentioned the phrase "job security". Some of the community members whom they serve, particularly those from the civil service/government sector, feel threatened by, what one respondent termed, "reverse discrimination" (affirmative action).

The vast majority of the respondents mentioned the revitalisation and strengthening of the family unit. However, Browning *et al.*'s (2000:23) concept of "critical familism", which encourages "equal regard or mutuality" of privileges and responsibilities within the family unit, suggests that families should not be assumed as working in the best interest of each and every member. Furthermore, Abdul Aziz (2013:70) argues that domestic violence entails a deconstruction of culture for the purpose of identifying those who sanction and lay claim to cultural rights. Her idea compels one to ask, whose interest is a culture serving when it commodifies and marginalises certain members of the community? Respondent six summarised:

The community also needs to answer for the question of domestic violence and other forms of violence in society. This is the work of both the church and society. If the church system is outdated to answer some of the problems from domestic and society, the church needs to revise what they need to do in order to answer these kind of questions.

Other opinions of respondents include, "Domestic violence will always be there. There is a difference between addressing the problem and solving the problem", and "If the people are not accepting Jesus as our saviour and that Jesus is peace, domestic violence will be there until Jesus Christ comes back because we are human."

## 8. CONCLUSION

This article explored how clergy from the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands region approach reported incidents of domestic violence among the congregations they serve. The respondents' contributions suggest that clergy find it difficult to deal with the unfortunate and uncomfortable phenomenon of domestic violence. The article suggested that clergy's response to domestic violence is influenced by intersecting variables, including, among other factors, the nature of the community they serve; family patterns; individual choices of receptiveness to clergy's counsel, and clergy's church denomination and training in domestic violence. Clergy may not necessarily be the first port of call after experiencing domestic violence. It is not clear at what point cases are reported to the clergy. Respondents' narratives suggest that different family patterns may have implications for the nature of clergy's counsel to victims and perpetrators of domestic violence and how they respond to such counsel. Clergy serving the affluent communities emphasise building the victims' self-esteem, compared to low-income communities where the clergy discuss basic survival and physiological issues, emulating Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs theory. Despite receiving no specialised training in domestic violence (eight respondents had no training and four had limited training), the respondents demonstrated their willingness to accompany victims and perpetrators; a Liberation Theology's tenet of "accompaniment". This principle is significant. It is argued that there is a need for new ways of reflecting on domestic violence beyond the assumption that domestic violence is a private matter.

Another point of interest is whether the reported increase in incidences of domestic violence is related to the decline in church attendance reported in modern times. Are the two related? With the liberal constitution pertinent to South Africa and the emphasis on human and women rights, it may well be that the apparent increase in the incidence of domestic violence may be due to an increase in reporting, as opposed to an increase in the commission of domestic violence against women. It may be that women are now more aware of their rights and understand that they should not tolerate violence from whatever quarter. This article agrees with Ellison *et al.*'s (2007:1108) assertion that

[religious] phenomena must be examined in all their complexity and positioned within appropriate contexts ... We need research that examines the ways in which clergy, church teachings, and religious leaders have fostered attitudes that justify or even condone domestic violence.



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