Building Bridges Between Churches And Community Resources: An Overview of the Work of the Religion And Violence

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The Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research (FVRC) is an Atlantic Region centre that conducts action-oriented research and public education on family violence and violence against women. The FVRC is affiliated with the University of New Brunswick and actively builds and sustains partnerships among academics, policy makers, service providers, and community organizations. The FVRC supports the work of many research teams conducting collaborative studies on a wide range of family violence issues throughout the Atlantic Provinces and beyond. The ultimate goal of the FVRC is to identify underlying root causes of family violence to promote evidence-based changes in practice and foster action to end violence and support the victims and survivors of family violence. The FVRC was established in 1992 and became a founding member of the Canadian Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence when it was formed in 1997.

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Telling Our Story

For many church people in North American society, *religion* and *violence* are antithetical concepts. The notion that *wife abuse* or family *violence* might be an issue for people who are members of faith communities has seemed difficult to comprehend—glaring inconsistency with the gospel message that churches preach (Kroeger and Beck, 1998; Kroeger and Nason-Clark, 2001). And yet, social scientific research since the 1960s clearly indicates that church women and their families are not immune from the devastating effects of violence and abuse (DeKeseredy and MacLeod, 1998; Horton and Williamson, 1988; Statistics Canada, 1993; Wood and McHugh, 1994). Despite the high esteem accorded to the family in church traditions and teaching, Christian families are not always healthy and wholesome (Brown and Bohn, 1989; Fiorenza and Copeland, 1994; Fortune, 1991). While the Christian home is often assumed to be a sacred sanctuary, the simple truth is that it is not always safe (Nason-Clark, 1998).

The abuse of women and other forms of family violence knows no religious, cultural, or socio-economic boundaries (Copeland, 1994; Timmins, 1995). Over the last several decades, researchers with diverse educational and ideological backgrounds have uncovered and begun to document the secret side of family life (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980; Martin, 1981; Thorne-Finch, 1992). Once the mythical assumptions of harmonious family living were exposed, testimonies of abuse and the all too apparent consequences of dysfunction within the home, began to alert researchers and the public alike to the extent of family violence in our society (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Feld and Straus, 1989; *Fire in the Rose*, 1994). Feminist activists were particularly persistent in pressing society to acknowledge and reckon with the abuse of women (Loseke, 1992; Walker, 1990).

Attention has gradually turned to the church and the role it plays, both directly and indirectly in fostering attitudes that may permit or even promote abuse within the home (Bussert, 1986; Clarke, 1986; Halsey, 1984; Pagelow and Johnson, 1988; Whipple, 1987). It might be argued that congregations are in an excellent position to fulfil the prophetic voice of contemporary Christianity by speaking out in condemnation against any form of abuse (Kroeger and Nason-Clark, 2001; *Fire in the Rose*, 1994).

It might be argued that congregations are in an excellent position to fulfil the prophetic voice of contemporary Christianity by speaking out in condemnation against any form of abuse.
Yet, the patriarchal structures of most denominations might thwart any attempt to even raise the issue in a serious way (c.f., Brown and Bohn, 1989; Adams, 1994). Some obvious questions begged for careful investigation:

- Where does the church stand on the issue of violence against women and other forms of family violence?
- Has the church somehow compounded the problems of abuse through its teachings?
- Do victims of abuse seek out the church and find in its buildings and fellowships a safe haven from the ravages of abusive relationships?
- How well equipped is the church (and its clergy) to minister to those who come looking for help?
- What does the church have to offer that would aid in the elimination of the underlying causes of women abuse and family violence?
- Is it possible for the church to work cooperatively with secular agencies in helping victims of abuse and in combating its underlying causes?

In an effort to answer some of these questions, The Religion and Violence Research Team was established in 1992 at the initiative of Dr. Nancy Nason-Clark. The Team was part of the original proposal for the development of The Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre, a national centre of excellence for Family Violence Research at the University of New Brunswick.

Coordinated by Dr. Nason-Clark, the Team is comprised of research associates (Dr. Lori Beaman and Dr. Lois Mitchell), and community partners (Rev. Terry Atkinson and Rev. Sheila McCrea), plus several graduate student assistants.

**Members of the Team**

**Dr. Nancy Nason-Clark** is a Professor of Sociology at the University of New Brunswick where she has been researching issues of gender and contemporary Christianity for over 15 years. She has served as President of the International Association for the Sociology of Religion, and is editor of the scholarly journal, *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*. Nancy is one of 18 members on the international task force on abuse created in 1999 by the World Evangelical Fellowship.

*When I invited Lois to begin working together on this initiative, I never dreamed that our projects and the results from them would be as far-reaching or impact so completely my own professional life and time. When Lori joined our team she brought her legal training and, in the intervening years, her own work based on the Team’s studies began to flourish. Sheila and Terry offered us the much-needed connections with grass-roots congregations and people of faith. Several graduate students completed theses connected to the team- Amanda, Christy, Lisa, Lenora, Michelle and Lori- each one was hired as a research assistant on*
grant monies made available to me. I am very grateful to the foundations, government departments and professional bodies that have funded our research projects and to the journals and publishers who have put our work into print. Violence against women is everyone’s issue—my goal is to ensure that faith communities be partners in its solution.

Dr. Lois Mitchell is a sociologist who was Chair of the Family Violence Committee of the United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces when the Religion and Violence Research Team was formed, and is now Interim Director of Social Action. Lois wears two hats with the Team: one as a Research Associate and one as a Community Partner and active liaison between the Team and the Baptist Convention.

Working with the Team has given me an opportunity to combine my academic skills and training with my desire to truly impact the lives of people who have experienced – or are currently experiencing – abuse at home. Furthermore, it has allowed me to look more carefully at the various factors which affect the church’s response to this issue and thus has helped me to understand how sometimes very subtle shifts in thinking and approach can enhance the effectiveness of the church’s response. The collaborative research model and action based research goals of the team combine to make this a unique and exciting venture. The goal of building bridges between the church and other community resources is, in my opinion, a worthy challenge. My work with the Team was also instrumental in preparing me to co-facilitate a support group for women who had experienced abuse in my own community. This experience has impacted my life on many levels.

Dr. Lori Beaman is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Lethbridge. She has been actively involved in the transition house movement in New Brunswick, practised law for five years, and decided to connect theory and practice through a Ph.D. in sociology. Her research in the east has been continued with Mormon women in the west.

Involvement with the Team allowed me to explore in greater detail some of the questions that arose out of my legal practice, which involved representing many abused women: why did some churches recognize the devastating effects of violence against women, and others ignore this pressing social issue? I have also been able to work toward linking the transition house movement with a valuable resource—churches and church women. This practical aspect of our research is of central importance to me. Listening to the different language of groups is key to facilitating their cooperation. My work with the Team was also instrumental in preparing me to co-facilitate a support group for women who had experienced abuse in my own community. Having spent 10 years in Social Work prior to entering the ministry, I am very aware of family violence. When I look out on my congregation on Sunday morning I know there are women who are living in fear.

Rev. Terry Atkinson is a pastor within the Baptist Convention who was serving on the Family Violence Committee when the Team was formed. Through his pastoral experience, Terry brought to the Team a keen understanding of the issues facing pastors when
confronted with a person experiencing abuse at home. A respected pastor and pastoral counselor within the Baptist Convention, Terry has been a valuable resource person and sounding board for the Team throughout its series of research initiatives and follow-up projects.

*Having spent 10 years in Social Work prior to entering the ministry, I am very aware of family violence. When I look out on my congregation on Sunday morning I know there are women who are living in fear. Being a small part of this team has been informative, challenging and at times uncomfortable. As pastors we must accept that violence and abuse happens to the people we minister to in the church, as well as to the people outside the church. The team has worked hard to inform pastors and lay people about this crucial problem and although my contribution has been minimal, it is a privilege to work with such competent and dedicated team members.*

**Rev. Sheila McCrea** is currently Dean of Discipleship at Bethany Bible College and former Director of Wesleyan Women International of the Atlantic District of the Wesleyan Church. A frequent speaker at women’s conventions and other church functions, Sheila is an expositor of Scripture and a pastoral counsellor. Among her varied contributions to the Team, has been her ability to help us to navigate our role in challenging the churches and church women to greater compassion to victims of abuse.

*It has been a privilege to participate as a member on this team. It has reinforced in my mind what can happen when Christians join together and focus on looking for solutions to a problem. This has given me a greater awareness of the abuse which women who are believers experience in the home, a place which should be safe. It has also given me an opportunity to share in how to reach out to hurting women in concrete ways. I have been encouraged by the response of both the clergy and church women to the research. I sense that as a result of being a part of this team, I will be able to minister more effectively to women.*

**Research Assistants:** Since 1992, our Team has been privileged to have a number of very competent and very committed research assistants who have worked with us, funded by external grants. All of these women completed theses connected in some way to the work of Dr. Nancy Nason-Clark and the team. While it is correct to note that several have moved from New Brunswick, none of them have formally cut their ties to the team; therefore, we consider them honourary research assistants, in recognition of the important role they played in data collection, data management or data analysis and their ongoing commitment to end violence against women.

**Lori Beaman:** Lori completed her Ph.D. thesis on the lives of evangelical women and analyzed, amongst other issues, their knowledge of and response to woman abuse. Her dissertation has been published by Challice Press. She is now a member of the Department of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge.
Lisa Hanson: After completing her MA thesis on the needs of elderly Baptist women, Lisa began working on her doctorate in sociology. Currently, she is living in Ottawa having just finished graduate courses at Carleton University.

Christy (Terris) Hoyt: Christy completed an MA thesis on evangelical youth and youth pastors concerning their perceptions of family life and family conflict. Over the years she has continued to be employed as a research assistant with the team on a part-time basis from her home in rural Cody’s, N.B.

Lenora (Shepherd) Sleep: Lenora completed her MA on Pentecostal families. Her study examined domestic labour, family conflict and labour force participation amongst men and women connected to Pentecostalism. She is still working part-time for the Team.

Michelle Spencer-Arsenault: Michelle completed an MA thesis on Catholic women and their conceptions of Mary, the mother of Jesus. A smaller component of her research investigated attitudes toward woman abuse amongst Catholic women. She is now a Ph.D. student at the University of Waterloo.

Amanda (Henry) Steeves: Amanda completed an honours project examining issues of family violence amongst church youth. Having received a graduate degree from Dalhousie University, Amanda is now employed by the province as a speech pathologist working with children in Fredericton.

Framing the Research

Aside from answering questions about the role of the church in dealing with family violence, the original and ongoing motivation for the work of the Team is the conviction that social change and institutional change are possible when a shared vision and determination to act are present. Thus the research itself, as well as the dissemination of the results, is best understood in terms of a model for action based research, which is very clearly and intentionally designed to effect change.

A collaborative approach to research, combining the knowledge, skills and perspectives of academic researchers with community partners, has given the work of the Team a distinctive flavour.

The original community partners for the Religion and Violence Team were the Atlantic District of the Wesleyan Church and the United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces. We found in these two evangelical groups, a ready willingness not only to participate, but to collaborate on the formulation and deployment of a multi-faceted research agenda. We have highlighted their involvement below. In more recent years, other
community partners approached us concerning involvement, including the Maritime Conference of the United Church of Canada, the Diocese of Fredericton of the Anglican Church and the Maritime Division of the Salvation Army. They too have been involved in various stages of our research programme.

Over the past eight years, the Team has conducted a series of studies, utilizing a myriad of research methodologies including mailed questionnaires, in-depth interviews, focus groups, telephone surveys, and community consultations. The various studies, each one building on the results of those preceding, have culminated in an action plan aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the various churches’ responses to those caught in a cycle of abuse and violence within the home. All of our studies have been Atlantic Canada based.

- **Study 1** was a pilot project which examined tensions, collaboration and contradictions between transition house workers and clergy in selected regions of eastern Canada. Twelve sites were chosen and telephone interviews were conducted with pastors and shelter workers with a goal of identifying instances of cooperation and disagreements.

- **Study 2** was a questionnaire study involving all ministry personnel of the United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces, the Atlantic District of the Wesleyan Church, the Maritime Conference of the United Church of Canada, the Maritime Division of the Salvation Army, and the Anglican Church- Diocese of Fredericton (Province of New Brunswick). Data collection covered clergy experience with woman and child abuse, knowledge of family violence issues and referral practices related to violence and battery. Over 550 clergy participated in this phase of the research (representing overall response rates in excess of 60%).

- **Study 3**, built upon the results of the clergy survey, involved in-depth interviews with a sample of 150 clergy ministering in various locations across New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland. These interviews probed clergy knowledge and pastoral experience of abuse and focussed specifically on pastoral counselling strategies with battered women.

- **Study 4** examined the unique and specific needs of evangelical church women who suffer abuse and the responses of women within that tradition to violence. Focus groups were held in 30 locations each involving between 5 and 20 church women.

- **Study 5** involved telephone interviews with a sample of congregational members who attend one of 24 selected local churches throughout the Atlantic Region. Its purpose is to understand where church families look for help when they find themselves in distress or conflict.

The **Building Bridges Project** involved a series of consultations, in each of the Atlantic Provinces, between religious and secular caregivers who were offering assistance to battered
women and their children. Its purpose was action-oriented, to build bridges between the “steeple” and the “shelter”.

Over one thousand clergy, woman abuse victims, shelter workers, members of church women’s groups and lay men and women have participated in our research through this series of studies. In this paper, we reflect specifically on the data from our evangelical partners, the United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces and the Atlantic District of the Wesleyan Church. Here our data sources included mailed questionnaires from 343 clergy (70% response rate), 100 in-depth interviews with pastors, and focus group interviews involving 247 church women. Taken together these studies portray a comprehensive picture of how evangelical congregations and their leaders understand the issue of woman abuse and respond to its victims and their families.

**Community Partners: Profiles of Two of our Participating Denominations**

**The United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces (UBCAP)**

For UBCAP the invitation to be a community partner with the Religion and Violence Research Team came at a strategic moment. The Social Action Commission had just established a Family Violence Committee under the leadership of Dr. Lois Mitchell and the then Director of the Social Action Commission, Rev. Doug Hapeman. The Committee was in the process of applying for funding to conduct research in the area of family violence within our denomination when Dr. Nason-Clark called to inquire as to whether or not we would be interested in a collaborative approach. We enthusiastically accepted, recognizing the benefits to be gained by combining our resources and working together for a common goal under the umbrella of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre.

Since 1992 the Baptist Convention has played an active role in the overall research agenda of the Team and has benefited from hearing the results of the research first hand. Through the Family Violence Committee this research has prompted the following specific responses:

- A Resolution on Family Violence was presented to the Annual Assembly in 1994 and was adopted by delegates representing the 550 churches of the Convention;
- A ministry handbook entitled Understanding the Dynamics of Family Violence (1995) was produced and distributed to all pastors serving within our Convention;
- A Bible study entitled Harmony in the Home (1996) (with an emphasis on Family Violence) was also produced and made available to pastors and churches;
- A Bible study entitled “What’s Love Got to do With It?” (1998) was written for adults and teens to promote the development of a Christian worldview.
- Dr. Mitchell has received numerous invitations to speak (through workshops and seminars) on the subject of Family Violence and on the work of the Team to audiences including both clergy and laity.
Through Dr. Lois Mitchell, who is now Interim Director of the Social Action Commission and Rev. Terry Atkinson, UBCAP has maintained a very close tie with the *Religion and Violence Research Team*.

The response rate of UBCAP pastors to the initial survey, and their willingness to participate in the follow-up interviews gives a good indication of the degree of interest that exists in this issue from a pastoral point of view. While not all pastors and churches have acted on the information made available through the research, we are confident that the results of the research have helped many pastors understand their role more clearly and be more effective in their ministry to victims of abuse.

UBCAP has greatly appreciated the academic excellence and overall integrity of the Team in the conduct of their research and in the dissemination of the results. It has been a very positive experience in collaborative research and one which we hope will continue to make a practical difference in bringing about needed change.

**The Atlantic District of the Wesleyan Church**

For the Atlantic District of the Wesleyan Church, the partnership between the university and its churches throughout Atlantic Canada was a new venture. At every stage of the process, since its initiation in 1992, pastors and congregations have shown great interest in the work of Dr. Nancy Nason-Clark and the Religion and Violence Research Team. The leadership of the Atlantic District of the Wesleyan Church has been involved in considering the results of the Team’s work, the role that it can play in disseminating these findings, and in brainstorming social action initiatives concerning how churches can respond more effectively to the challenges raised by Nancy and the Team.

The commitment of the Atlantic District of the Wesleyan Church to assist families in crisis and to model compassion and support to victims of abuse- and indeed their enthusiastic support of the Team- is evidenced in the following ways:

- Almost 90% of Wesleyan pastors have participated in some form of data collection by the Religion and Violence Research Team.
- In 1995, Dr. Nason-Clark was asked to give a plenary address to the annual ministerial convention, a conference which all ordained ministers are expected to attend. Later that year, she was invited to address Beulah Conference, a major convention involving Wesleyan lay people.
- All pastors of Wesleyan churches have received a free copy of *THE BATTERED WIFE: How Christians Respond to Family Violence*, supported by District funds.
- All Wesleyan pastors were sent a complimentary copy of the Baptist training materials produced by Dr. Mitchell and her committee, again supported by District funds.
- Several Wesleyan churches throughout Atlantic Canada have invited a member of the Religion and Violence Research Team to make a presentation or preach a message during one of their Sunday services. Over the last five years, there have been several
addresses by members of the Team at Wesleyan Women’s Conventions throughout the Atlantic Region.

- In 1999, Dr. Nason-Clark was asked to offer a training workshop for all ordained ministers of the Wesleyan Church.

**Overview of Research Results**

Not all of the voices tell the same tale. Some women victims tell of supportive religious counsel and a myriad of practical initiatives, while others were disappointed by the response they received from their faith community. Some transition house workers are wary of the involvement of clergy in the struggle to end family violence; while others believe that a more encouraging environment for cooperative projects can now be observed. Some clergy are quick to offer abused women and their families therapeutic options and spiritual support to augment the healing journey; while others are hindered by their own lack of experience or resistance to working with community agencies in a cooperative framework. And finally, women of faith talk of sharing their hearts and their listening ears with many women in crisis and thereby stand in the gap between the reality of women’s pain and the religious message of hope.

In this article, we want to share with the reader some of the complexities and ambiguities in understanding the relationship between violence and religious responses to its victims. The story has many layers and it is simply inappropriate and incorrect to suggest that churches and church people merely tell women to *go home and pray* that the abuse will stop, but it is also incorrect and inappropriate to claim that all victims receive supportive and empowering counsel from churches and their leaders. From our programme of research, we have learned that churches are indeed involved in bringing healing, but we have also learned that they need to be challenged to offer more practical and spiritual resources to those faced with the pain of abuse. Many religious victims of abuse want contact with their community of faith amidst their crisis.

In the following section, you will read quotations from our field-work with women victims, clergy, transition house workers and church women who are attempting to support victims of abuse. Their stories tell of the long-term suffering that abuse creates and the equally long healing journey. Responding to women victims and their families is multi-faceted: just as
abuse differs, so too do the needs of those who suffer. If churches are to fulfill their mandates as caring communities, they need to take seriously the prevalence and severity of abuse amongst church people and within the communities they serve.

The Voices

Voices of women victims

“The first time that I shared publicly my testimony… that was a healing thing… You feel shame to have been abused… I think women need to become healed enough that they can share so that they can help others but it, it takes time. I mean, it took me eight or nine years.” (Woman #3, Focus Group #7)

“I’ve grown up in the church and you’re not supposed to get [a] divorce, you know. You married this guy and you’re supposed to stick it out for better or worse and it’s really a hard decision to finally leave. It’s one of the hardest decisions I’ve ever made.” (Woman #2, Focus Group #1)

“He [God] gives me all the strength that I need to get through.” (Evangelical Woman)

“It’s not a safe place [the church] to come because once you get there… nobody knows what to do with you.” (Evangelical Woman)

Voices of women-helping-women

“And I think that… a woman, you know, that’s been abused will come to probably a woman in the church first even before the pastor.” (Woman #4, Focus Group 17)

“We as Christians believe in the sacredness of marriage [and] because of that I think you need to treat the whole family… Reconciliation…counselling… if the situation is so violent, then yes… divorce may be the only option.” (Woman #13, Focus Group #26)

“How can you say to a quote unquote non-Christian, ‘oh, come in sweetie, and let me pray with you?’ They’re going to go ‘hah! Pweet wey in your face.’ You know, that’s not a sensible thing to do at first, although God does answer prayer and God is a God of miracles. But you have to tell this woman that you care in tangible ways with… dropping her kids off, or give her a pair of boots… have a cup of coffee…” (Mother of two)

“I think there’s a very definite role that we can play as women, yet not, not only in the listening… There are women in the church [abused women] can come to without being ashamed, because I think shame is, is a big part of [it]… but we can also [help] in very practical and tangible ways… with the care of children and all the practical food and shelter needs; I think that women have a very large role to play.” (Woman #10, Focus Group #5)
**Voices of pastors**

“I would never say to a couple, [or] to a woman, or to a man, ‘You’ve got to stay in this relationship because God says you’ve got to stay in this relationship,’ I think that’s hogwash.” (Clergy Face-to-Face Interview #350)\(^{11}\)

“After all, they [crisis intervenors at transition houses] are performing a service. We call it a ministry; they may not call it a ministry. We feel an obligation that we should support those who are reaching out to help others. To us, this is a very Christian thing to do.” (Clergy Telephone Interview #16)\(^{12}\)

“Transition house is secularly based… Sometimes in secular involvement, they want our time, our money, but they don’t want [us] to talk about God.” (Clergy Telephone Interview #10)\(^{13}\)

“I don’t propose divorce… my focus in counselling [is] healing of relationships. Healing our relationship with God and healing our relationships with ourself… healing our relationship with one another, that’s my focus.” (Clergy Face-to-Face Interview #552)\(^{14}\)

“Basically… your task is to try to help a person in a very difficult moment in their life, using your best abilities, and whatever resources are available… I had occasion where she arrived at the house… he went on a bender… I took the wife and boys to our house, and they slept over, over night… because she was fearful at that time.” (Clergy Face-to-Face Interview #272)\(^{15}\)

**Voices of transition house workers**

“[Clergy] have a false sense of family- mommy, daddy and 2.2 kids… [And] They may have a false sense of what we do: that we break up families.” (Worker Interview #1.3)\(^{16}\)

“Lately there has been more openness and acceptance. Two years ago I would have said they [clergy] are scared of us.” (Worker Interview #1.2)\(^{17}\)

*I conducted the Building Bridges Workshop in Newfoundland, and for me, this was a strong affirmation of the value of the whole Building Bridges initiative. Gathered together for this workshop were a number of women who work with abused women, either directly or indirectly, and either through the Church or through secular agencies.\(^{18}\) The dynamics of the workshop were very encouraging in that over the course of the afternoon I could literally see walls of distrust coming down. In fact, near the end of the workshop one of the women who hold an influential position within a Government agency commented that, “I had no idea there were church women who understand the issues the way we do!” It was truly a remarkable experience. (Lois Mitchell)*

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Building Bridges Between Churches and Community Resources: An Overview

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Understanding the Results of our Research Programme

Emerging from our series of studies, with several denominations and employing a variety of methodologies, have been both signs of church sensitivity to abuse victims and obstacles to partnership between churches and community agencies. The good news, or signs of sensitivity, involves the informal support network operating amongst women of faith, the nature and extent of clerical intervention with abuse victims, the recognition by individual ministers and their denominations of ongoing training needs, the contact between church women’s groups and local transition houses: and the choices women are offered as intervention strategy (Nason-Clark, 1996; 1997; 1998a; 2000c).

As we conducted focus groups around Atlantic Canada, we were struck by both the consistency and the magnitude by which one woman looked out for another woman’s needs both within and beyond the walls of the local church. While women often turn to other women when they are in crisis, our team was also struck with the level and nature of clerical intervention in the lives of abused women, abusive men and their families. In both rural and urban settings, we heard pastors report that part of their counselling ministry was to victims of violence. It goes without saying that the level of pastoral counselling in this area does not even approximate the level of parishioner need, but it is important to note that ministers regularly are called upon to respond to the needs of abused women and their children. Most, however, do not feel well equipped to do so, and as a result, report that they sometimes feel caught between the needs of parishioners for counselling and their own feelings of inadequacy.

The involvement of church women’s groups in support of community shelters was first communicated to us by transition house staff. Here we learned that regular, but modest, financial and in-kind contributions trickled between women-led organizations in churches and local women’s shelters. We also learned that church women understand the prevalence and severity of violence through both religious and secular lens: they uphold the value and sanctity of the family which is central to their religious worldview, but as women, they know all too well that the family can be an unsafe place for women (Nason-Clark, 1995; Beaman, 1999; Beaman-Hall and Nason-Clark, 1997b).

While our data offer us many glimpses into the sensitivity that churches have towards abuse victims and their families, we have also documented that there are several challenges or blind-spots as they relate to religious understandings of abuse and intervention with victims. There is great reluctance to name violence against women clearly, favouring instead the more obscure phrase family violence, as well as a refusal to see church families as equally violent as those who do not attend church (Beaman- Hall and Nason-Clark, 1997a; Nason-Clark, 1996). Moreover, there is a tendency to overestimate the possibility of reconciliation in the lives of families torn apart by abuse (Nason-Clark, 1998b). Finally, rarely do ministers condemn abuse publicly from their primary platform- the pulpit (Nason-Clark, 1999).
Identified Need: Building Bridges Between the Steeple and the Shelter

The research findings outlined above led us to conclude that there was a need to enhance the communication between the secular and sacred communities, broadly defined. We were, however, particularly concerned with the limited communication that seemed to take place between shelter workers and churches. Church women, it seemed, had frequent contact with shelters for abused women in their communities. We heard both from church women and from shelter workers about the ongoing contact between these two groups.

Church women offered material support to shelters by putting together "kit bags" with shampoo, toothbrushes, and so on. They decorated and furnished rooms in transition houses, and they invited shelter workers to speak to their women's groups. Moreover, many individual women had family members or friends who had been abused, and who had come to them for either a listening ear or support of a practical nature, i.e., childcare or temporary lodging (Nason-Clark, 1997). This hands on support meant that church women were generally very knowledgeable about the nature of abuse and the ways in which it impacted on women. Their knowledge was tied to action. They regarded woman abuse as a pervasive community problem, one without religious boundaries (Nason-Clark, 1995).

For evangelical women, their Christian worldview provided the framework through which their responses to woman abuse were mediated. Yet, their personal experiences shaped their responses to the problem, sometimes in seeming contradiction to their religious ideology, especially on matters of the family (c.f., Beaman, 1999).

In contrast, clergy contact with shelters was sporadic to say the least. Moreover, clergy themselves acknowledged that they did not know enough about the work of shelters, or about the nature of abusive relationships. They were not able to call a shelter and ask to speak to a worker by name. While they expressed a willingness to learn, there did not seem to be a forum in which they could further their education on this issue.

The position of many transition house workers further underscored the need for enhanced communication between these two groups. While they were grateful for the support of church women, shelter workers expressed concern that abused women would be told to go home and pray about it if they turned to their faith communities in times of crisis. In many ways, they saw churches and their leaders as contributing to the problem rather than as part of the solution. Many shelter staff presumed that the religious community would simply endorse the family at all cost, even if it put a woman’s life at risk. This fear translated into a distancing of shelter workers from many of the churches in their communities (for a fuller discussion of the theoretical issues, see Barnsley, 1995; Timmins, 1995).
It seemed to us that while these groups were sometimes using different language, both were committed to ministering to abused women. We sought ways to bring members of each of these groups—church women, clergy and shelter workers—together to discuss the ways in which they might be able to better meet the needs of battered women. With some trepidation we began to organize what became known as the "Building Bridges" project. We were admittedly fearful that any miscommunication that took place during the workshop we planned to hold would further exacerbate the divide between churches and transition houses, placing further obstacles on the pathway between the steeple and the shelter.

In many ways, the Building Bridges project epitomizes the working pattern of the Religion and Violence Research Team, both in its organization, and in the actual structure of the workshop.

From our research with clergy, transition house workers and church women, it became clear to us that despite their differences, these groups have much to offer abused women, especially if they work together to pool resources and knowledge. It was also apparent that there existed a willingness amongst each of these groups to work together to end violence against women. Each of our Team members was frustrated at the apparent miscommunication between these groups, yet each of us was encouraged by the way in which church women and transition house workers had been able to bridge their differences and work together to meet the practical needs of abused women. The challenge would be to see if this sort of cooperative partnership might extend to include clergy, the majority of whom are men. It was both from our research and our individual experiences in the transition house and church communities that this project emerged. In short, for each of us the Building Bridges project represented the opportunity to achieve realistic goals based on our results from our programme of research.

Our Team was fortunate to have the financial assistance of the Status of Women Canada for the "Building Bridges" project. The specific objectives were developed collaboratively, with each team member bringing her or his experience and expertise to the table. Our first objective was to hold a one-day workshop with an audience of clergy, transition house workers and church women. Its purpose was to seek out existing links between sacred and secular communities. In addition, it was hoped that the workshop would provide an opportunity for participants to discuss and develop strategies to help churches and secular agencies to overcome barriers to cooperative service provision to abused women. We chose five communities, with a church woman, two transition house workers, and a clergy person from each.

A second objective of this multi-phase project was to develop a concrete action plan for each of the five participating regions. This included the development of goals for immediate collaboration, in addition to cooperative ventures to be entered into within the first six months of the project. We also encouraged participants to think about developing twelve month goals. The Religion and Violence Research Team facilitated this by conducting site
visits for the purpose of aiding the development of the community action plans and to distribute Team data to assist in the development of that plan.

From the transition house perspective, the workshop represented a number of things. First, it provided an opportunity to educate clergy and churches about the everyday life of a transition house worker. Secondly, the workshop was a chance to tell clergy and church women the specific needs of transition houses. Shelters are under-funded, with staff who deal with many emotionally charged situations and thus themselves are often in danger of "burn out".

From the clergy perspective, the workshop offered an opportunity to meet and get to know transition house workers in a neutral setting, and in turn, to present themselves as individuals who truly want to be more effective in their response to victims of abuse who come to them for help. It gave clergy a chance to articulate some of the frustrations and limitations they experience in this area of ministry.

The church women who attended the workshop had an opportunity to see this issue from the perspective of both groups of professionals, and to discern how their own experience in working with abused women reflected the various concerns and issues of transition house workers and clergy. In a sense, it is the church women, quietly offering emotional and material support to a woman in need, who provide a measure of stability in the midst of confusion. While church women may not share some of the ideological concerns of transition house workers, or of clergy, their contribution to a ministry of care to abuse victims is extremely vital.

Having partners in community education, material support and even a sympathetic ally are important contributions to transition houses. Finally, transition house workers are not hostile to the spiritual needs of the women they serve, but rather are trained to meet the immediate needs of women in crisis. With the perspectives of clergy, church women and transition house workers represented, the workshop sought both to identify the possibilities for collaboration and to begin to address the challenges we had identified in our programme of research.

We were encouraged by the results of phase one of the project, and thus decided, again with the assistance of Status of Women Canada, to launch a second phase of the project that involved consultations with women clergy, shelter workers and interested community leaders in the capital cities of each of the Atlantic Provinces—St. John’s, Halifax, Charlottetown and Fredericton. At these meetings we encouraged participants to work together to explore barriers to collaboration and some solutions to overcoming these obstacles. In addition, we met with Baptist and Wesleyan regional officers
and directors in order to explore the possibilities for collaborative projects that would meet the goals of the Building Bridges initiative.

As a result of the discussion at these meetings, it was clear that the different needs of these groups could in part be met through a series of pamphlets. The needs of abused Christian women could be addressed by making these pamphlets available in women’s washrooms of churches around the region, a place where women could read or take information in privacy.\(^{21}\)

What became apparent through the process of these consultations was the need for readily accessible information on violence against women and the resources available to help them.

We have made plexiglas holders and several copies of the brochures available to pastors throughout Atlantic Canada, including those of the Anglican, Baptist, Salvation Army, Wesleyan and United faiths. We have also made this package available to transition house workers in an attempt to address their frustrations in working with abused Christian women. In addition to the pamphlets,\(^{22}\) a number of the members of the Religion and Violence Research Team have responded to numerous requests from various groups to speak about the research of the Team. A package for pastors which includes a designation of the first Sunday of November Family Violence Awareness Sunday, a sermon outline, a devotional, women’s Bible study and a fact sheet has also been sent to all Baptist and Wesleyan pastors in this region.

**Challenges**

**Challenges to the Secular Caring Community**

In working to meet the needs of abused women it is important for the secular caring community to acknowledge that the women who come to them for assistance have spiritual needs, and that some of them will be part of a faith community. Abused women who have faith commitments need to feel that their faith can play a role in their healing, and that they do not have to be embarrassed or ashamed to disclose their faith commitment. The secular caring community needs to be aware that healing and wholeness can take place in the context of a faith commitment, even when that commitment is to a conservative religion.

Admittedly, not all pastors are knowledgeable about the dynamics of abuse. Secular caring agencies can play an important role in enhancing clergy knowledge about abuse so that they can more effectively respond to the needs of abused women. It is therefore important that secular agencies

Our research indicates that the more knowledgeable the clergy person is about abuse, the more likely she or he is to refer abused women to secular resources.
services be prepared to participate in clergy education but also that they have sacred caregivers, whether clergy or church women, available as resources.

Churches have vast human resources, and church women in particular have already demonstrated a willingness to offer their time and energy in helping transition houses to meet the needs of abused women. Strengthening the ties of this already established relationship will only serve to enhance the service, whether secular or sacred, to abused women and their children.

**Challenge to the Churches**

**Providing Safety in the Midst of Crisis**

First and foremost, churches and their leaders need to strive to offer victims of abuse a safe place to disclose the pain of the past or the present and to be positioned to offer practical and spiritual assistance once a disclosure has been made.

What does it mean to offer victims safety? It certainly means ensuring that no woman returns to an unsafe home environment without first being offered options of community and/or church resources. Sometimes, it will mean offering to call the transition house to inquire whether space is available. Sometimes, it will involve reminding the abuse victim of the danger she has experienced in the past, and the threat to her own (and her children’s) physical or emotional health. Sometimes, it will include giving her information about what she can do should the situation in the future escalate to a point where she is ready to leave, temporarily or forever. Often, it will include assisting an abused woman with safety planning, such as gathering important documents and emergency money and keeping them in another location, developing a code with a neighbour so that they would know to come if needed. Always, it will involve recognition of her pain and a validation of her worth in the sight of God and the faith community.

**Providing Support for the Healing Journey**

The road along which a victim travels is fraught with many obstacles and it is important that churches, their leaders, and lay people who wish to be involved in supporting abuse survivors, realize that the journey is long and arduous. Many caregivers will be needed to support a woman and her children as they struggle to make sense of their victimization and as they struggle to begin life anew apart from the violence of the past, or to reunite with partners who are willing to recognize their abusive ways and to seek help to change their behaviour. Most likely victims will need assistance with both the practical dilemmas of everyday living (food, shelter, transportation), supportive counsel (listening to the stories, validating the pain and the long process of recovery), referral suggestions (places or people from whom specific therapeutic or legal or medical expertise can be sought) and religious needs (condemning the violence in the language of the community of faith, offering spiritual guidance and hope).
Encouraging Violent-Free Family Contact by Words and by Example

Throughout the weekly routine of church life, and indeed throughout the Christian calendar year, there is a myriad of opportunities for congregations and their leaders to model and encourage violent-free family living. Curricula for Sunday School, or vacation Bible school, camps and retreats for age-specific groups, church picnics and harvest festivals, youth activities and seniors outings—all of these programmes provided under the umbrella of many local churches give ample opportunity to reinforce healthy relationships and condemn power, control and violence. But, perhaps the greatest educational opportunity of all is the Sunday morning sermon where a pastor or priest stands before the assembled women and men of the church to celebrate the faith and to admonish congregants to live according to Christian principles. Moreover, pastors often have many informal occasions where they meet with individuals either in the privacy of that person’s home or on church premises. These informal times, as well, enable the importance of family life to be addressed by word and example. One great opportunity for clergy to communicate the value and importance of violent-free relationships is during pre-marital counselling sessions.

Building Bridges to the Community

Bridges join together discrete bodies of land which might otherwise remain isolated from one another. Amidst the contemporary religious landscape, there is often a gulf between the steeple and the shelter, or the community and the church. Pastors and congregations can choose to play a role in bridge building, as can professionals and volunteers connected with community agencies. Forging links where in the past there has been misunderstanding or a lack of shared goals can produce an environment where cooperative or collaborative ventures can serve both community and church mission statements.

The minister who invites transition house staff to make a presentation during a church service is involved in bridge building, as is the pastor who calls the local shelter to inquire whether they are experiencing any practical need in the facility that church people might meet.

Fund-raising events, brochures, meet-and-greet sessions are just a few ways that clergy can initiate bridge building between the congregation and the transition house. On the other hand, shelter staff and their boards need to recognize that many abused women have religious issues that surface as they struggle towards healing and wholeness. When a transition house invites a new woman pastor in town to view the facility, celebrates with a local church women’s group in response to a well-attended fund-raising event or sends brochures about the shelter to the churches, they too are involved in bridge building.
Conclusion

Given the multiple emotional and practical needs presented by woman abuse victims and their dependent children, not to mention the perpetrators of that violence- it would be foolhardy for any one organization or community agency to claim either ownership of the problem, or ownership of the solution. The few resources that have been written on abused religious women clearly demonstrate the need to provide both church-based and community-based therapeutic options to victims (Fortune, 1991; Weaver, 1993; Wood and McHugh, 1994). In general, the road to healing and recovery for woman abuse victims involves both sacred and secular care-givers (Horton and Williamson, 1988; Whipple, 1987; Nason-Clark, 2000a). Violence needs to be condemned in the language of the culture and in the language of the spirit.

Clergy and congregations are often an overlooked resource in the struggle to end violence in the family context. Though not all-sufficient, churches can provide both practical and emotional support to victims and effective challenge to perpetrators. And imperative in this process is the need to discover common ground between churches and other caring agencies in the community, but not to camouflage diversity of purpose, vision or perspective. The challenge for churches and their leaders will be to neither minimize the faith component of their supportive work, nor underestimate the practical and emotional assistance that a woman abuse victim requires on her journey towards healing. The challenge for secular agencies will be to recognize the power of a woman’s faith to sustain her through any life event, even violence, or to compromise her therapeutic recovery. Above all, we need to ensure that churches are safe places to disclose that one has been abused and that shelters are safe places to disclose that one is religious (Nason-Clark, 2000b).

Notes

1 These were the two denominations involved in our Building Bridges Project. Time and budget constraints mitigated against defining the constituency for this project more broadly.

2 In this publication, we have used a variety of phrases to refer to women connected to their faith traditions: religious women, church women, women of faith, Christian women. These are terms that both scholars employ and the women use in reference to themselves.

3 Quoted in Nason-Clark, 1977:108.

4 Quoted in Nason-Clark, 1997:xiv.

5 Quoted in Beaman, 1999:129.

6 Quoted in Nason-Clark, 1998:60.

7 Quoted in Nason-Clark, 1997:xiii.

8 Quoted in Nason-Clark, 1997:20.

9 Quoted in Beaman-Hall and Nason-Clark, 1997b:60.

10 Quoted in Nason-Clark, 1997:121.

11 Quoted in Nason-Clark, 1997:xiii.
Quoted in Beaman-Hall and Nason-Clark, 1997a:183.
13 Quoted in Beaman-Hall and Nason-Clark, 1997a:188.
14 Quoted in Nason-Clark, 1999:44.
15 Quoted in Nason-Clark, 2000 Shupe.
16 Quoted in Nason-Clark, 1999:40.
17 Quoted in Nason-Clark, 1999:40.
18 Included in the workshop were several transition house workers.
19 The actual title was “Building Bridges: Developing an Action Plan for Cooperation between Churches and Secular Organizations on the Issue of Violence Against Women.”
20 Unlike our first workshop which included only male clergy, the second consultation included only women clergy of the Baptist and Wesleyan faiths, admittedly a small group but important voices concerning the religious struggles of abused women in these denominational settings.
21 Information from our own research programme was included on the brochures as well as some of the ideas identified through the Building Bridges workshops.
22 Copies of these brochures can be obtained by contacting the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family violence Research, PO Box 4400, Fredericton, NB E3B 5A3, telephone 506-453-3595.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the obstacles for religious organizations in collaborating with community agencies?

2. What are some of the obstacles for community organizations in collaborating with churches?

3. Why is it important to pave a pathway between the steeple and the shelter?

4. Why might it be so difficult for a woman to disclose to a community agency that her religion is very important to her?

5. Why might it be so difficult for a woman to disclose to her faith community that her husband is violent?

6. What are some of the ways that churches can condemn violence in the home?

7. What are some of the bridges that need building if secular and sacred workers are to cooperate on joint initiatives?
Selected References


