

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

Theological Reflections

NOVEMBER 2023



Trigger warning. This paper contains references to and stories of domestic, family and intimate partner violence, including physical, emotional and spiritual abuse. These can create triggers for some people in reference to their own lived experiences, or those of people close to them. Readers are encouraged to take appropriate steps and seek support if these stories are disturbing.



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SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA



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I Introduction and Summary

Domestic and Family Violence (sometimes referred to as Domestic Abuse) is a form of oppression which breaks human spirit and relationships, preys on people in their vulnerability, violates the safety of home life and attacks a person's most basic human values of trust, love, hope and self-worth.

Theological and pastoral reflection on these key factors by Christian communities should lead to a heightened awareness of the prevalence of Domestic and Family Violence (DFV), sensitive pastoral practice and community life, and a more sustained social and political engagement for living out the gospel. Through theological reflection, Christian faith can and should challenge cultural assumptions, while at the same time being humble enough to admit its own contribution to oppression.

This paper was written for the Justice and International Mission Cluster of the Uniting Church in Australia's Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. The paper seeks to connect a range of theological strands to the urgent questions raised by domestic violence in an Australian context. We hope that readers will bring these reflections to bear on their particular contexts through care, advocacy and activism. At the end of the paper a range of pastoral, ethical and theological resources are offered for further engagement.

We acknowledge the voices of those who have contributed to this ongoing resource through their lived experience, thoughtful reflection and ongoing activism. We also recognise that further resources will continue to be produced in this area, and encourage ongoing reading and reflection on the issues raised.

- ▶ Violence in family situations is a major issue in Australia. This includes domestic violence, family violence, intimate partner violence and elder abuse.
- ▶ The goal of this reflection is to provide a theological grounding for Uniting Church supporters responding to DFV. The purpose of the theological response is to create and support a society and communities where domestic abuse can be openly discussed and all people can live in safety and hope. Ultimately we are working towards the elimination of DFV.
- ▶ This paper introduces five theological themes connected with DFV and provides a bibliography of relevant reading and pastoral material. Further reading is encouraged.
- ▶ Five theological areas are:
 - The life of God as love
 - God, Love and Justice
 - The nature and character of humanness and human community.
 - Thinking Theologically – interpreting the community and scripture.
 - Some additional notes on Liturgical Theology and Practice



I Context

Violence in family settings is a major social issue in Australia. Family violence is all around us, with one in six women directly impacted in some way and children and young people witnessing it or being victims.¹ Because it happens most often in the home, DFV can be hidden from view, minimised or covered over. It can be treated as a 'private' matter. Yet, family violence erodes social fabric and community life because it effects trust and the ability for individuals to learn love, care and build good relationships. A home is a place where trust and love are learned and practiced. These basic skills and attitudes towards self and other people (as well as the wider community, society and the world in which we live), form a basis of good societal living. This social fabric is damaged when fear, mistrust, or abuse are frequently experienced in homes. Family violence therefore impacts the very nature of society and what it means to be human, as well as the individuals directly affected.

The title '*Domestic and Family Violence*' describes both the context and the issue. In modern Australia, family includes the relationships of parent-child (including when the child is an adult), intimate partners, siblings and adult-child (where 'adult' can refer to another family member). Formal categories used in reports include "Family Violence", "Domestic Violence", "Intimate Partner Violence" or "Elder Abuse". Reports indicate that DFV is a 'Gendered issue' – that is, it effects women disproportionately to men, with approximately 75% of perpetrators being male; on average, one woman a week and one man a month is killed by a current or former partner.²

The use of the words 'Family' and 'Domestic' also indicates that this most often occurs in home settings, unlike other forms of violence that often happen in public. Violence can include physical, sexual, verbal, financial, social or emotional violence, intimidation or other forms of harm. Such abuse may or may not include physical violence. For this reason, some advocates prefer the term 'domestic abuse' because what is being described as violence can take a range of forms including financial and social control, psychological torment, verbal abuse, or emotional manipulation.³ These are most often an expression of power imbalances where the abuser seeks to control or exert power over another.

The prevalence of family violence means that both victims and perpetrators are in our congregations, community groups, and are neighbours to our church members. We reveal our own privilege if we believe this does not effect us and do not need to talk about this hidden scourge.

If the church is going to make a meaningful contribution towards reducing family violence, it can draw immediately from its understanding of the nature of God seen in Jesus Christ, how we understand what it means to be human, the nature of community and particularly Christian community, and pay attention to the way we talk about relationships in our worship and pastoral settings.

1 <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/domestic-and-family-violence-statistics>

2 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-sexual-violence-data/contents/about>

3 Victorian law defines family violence as "behaviour by a family member that creates fear and control over their partner, ex-partner, other family members." <https://www.police.vic.gov.au/family-violence#what-the-law-says>



I Reflections

The Life of God as love

Christian belief and practice is centred in an understanding of God as love. That love is seen expressly in Jesus Christ whose life, death and resurrection form the core of Christian belief. Connected with God's love are concepts such as justice and righteousness which are opposites of oppression, injustice and sin. An outworking of justice is peace (shalom) and salvation (i.e. being saved from oppression, injustice, sin, etc). Any mistreatment of those with less power is an injustice.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the prophets and Psalms frequently reference God's steadfast love (Hebrew - *hesed*) or covenant love. God loves God's people whether or not they love in return.

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favour to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his **steadfast love**. (Isaiah 63:7)

In the New Testament, God's love is expressed for Creation, and especially humanity.

God, who is rich in mercy, **out of the great love with which he loved us** even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-7)

In these ways the love of God is both something that God does AND part of who God is.

A second element of God's love in scripture are the frequent references to a responsiveness to God's love: Because God is Love, God's people are called to also love others in relationships and in justice.

Beloved, let us **love one another**, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for **God is love**. (1 John 4:7&8)

The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God **must love their brothers and sisters also**. (1 John 4:21)

God's people, including the Christian community, are called to follow, model and articulate this love in their gatherings, practice and mission. In fact, it is a witness to those not in the community that these are God's people: 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' (John 13:35) This love always acts with the best intentions for the other.

These understandings of the love of God and love for other (including justice against injustice and salvation from oppression) has implications for the way we address DFV. What does such love look like in practical terms? Are there limits to love? What is the relationship between love and justice or injustice?

God, Love and Justice

- 'With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'
⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?
⁹ The voice of the Lord cries to the city
(it is sound wisdom to fear your name):
Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city!
¹⁰ Can I forget the treasures of wickedness in the
house of the wicked,
and the scant measure that is accursed?
¹¹ Can I tolerate wicked scales
and a bag of dishonest weights? (Micah 6:6-11)

Justice is a characteristic of Divine action. In the face of oppression or violence, God acts for justice or looks for justice being done. The prophets and Jesus both expect a response of justice from those with power or wealth. This requires paying attention to oneself and to those around us and their needs, rather than living for self.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets and the Torah (Law) of the people of Israel are clear about God's special favour for protecting vulnerable people – the poor, orphan, widow, stranger, foreigner (e.g. Deuteronomy 10:17-19; Psalm 146:9). When justice is not done by the people of God, the prophets announce God's displeasure and judgement against the unjust (Isaiah 10:1-3; Isaiah 29:19-21; Amos 5:10-17). They also offer visions of a future based on God's values. These are marked by harmony, equality, and peace between humans and within creation (see Isa 11:6-7 or Rev 21:1-4)

In Jesus, the character of God is more explicitly expressed in terms of non-violence. The Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-11), bookended in Matthew with the Parable of the Final Judgement (Matt. 25:31-46), bring together the blessing of the peace-makers, persecuted and righteous with the response of God's people to the poor, imprisoned, hungry. In these, the attention of the listener is drawn towards the persecuted, the imprisoned, the hungry... and to the response (or non response) of God's people for justice and care.

From a western perspective, justice can often be punitive and individualistic. However a "biblical imperative of justice as shalom, the communal response of striving toward wholeness in response to God's grace,"⁴ is one based on communal (including family) responsibilities. This makes justice both an individual and a communal responsibility. In discussions on DFV, attention frequently turns to the place of society or community in countering these injustices in the home. "Ours is a commitment to a justice which is, ultimately, the most complete form of empowerment and healing – for all persons."⁵

Where understandings of love and power may fail, using a lens of justice can provide an alternate pathway into understanding DFV.⁶ Some feminists critique the language of love as the basis for intimate relationships, preferring a language of rights or justice. In lived experience of male violence against women in the home, abuse of the language of love can be rampant.

4 Sarah Bentley. "Bringing Justice Home: The Challenge of the Battered Women's Movement for Christian Social Ethics." *In Violence against Women and Children*. New York: Continuum, 1998. 166

5 Bentley, "Justice", 167

6 Bentley, "Justice", 155



Male violence against women can be disguised as love, or 'love' can be weaponised as the reason for tyranny, violence or abuse, (“...so that [women] will be what men can love”).⁷ For this reason, some want to shift from language of love towards an articulation of justice through a language of rights and respect.

In the Christian tradition, however, love is inseparable from justice and an awareness of power dynamics. Any action (or inaction) that diminishes the other is not love. This understanding can be seen when Jesus tells the story we know as the “Good Samaritan” in Luke 10. The story is an answer to a question about the limits of love – “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus and the Scribe agree that the law commands them to love their neighbours, but they disagree about what this looks like. Jesus’ answer shows that both those who harm the victim and those who ignore him as he lies vulnerable and wounded by the road, fail to love.

Historically, women and children have had few legal protections, often giving men legal power and control over them. In this context some argue that a ‘discussion of rights within the family becomes virtually imperative’⁸. However useful it may be to raise the issue of rights in a legal context, the language of ‘rights’ can be fraught and western in its articulation. Theologically love and justice are framed not in rights, but in common humanity. It is essential therefore that any conversation about domestic abuse begins with an acknowledgement of the full humanity and equality of women, children and men before God. In the light of full and common humanity, there is no room for abuse of power, control or violence.

The nature and character of humanness and human community

Christianity asserts a fundamental notion that humans are created equal through being made in the ‘likeness’ of God. Whether in Genesis 1:27 or Galatians 3:26-29, these concepts are a core theological idea on which understandings of relationships (in the Church, family, community) and even elements of salvation⁹ rest. The early church sought to undermine many of the inequalities of its time. For example, in describing to the Galatians how the Church includes Gentiles and Jews equally, Paul (in deep frustration) asserts that no one has special status in the eyes of God by virtue of ethnicity, social standing or gender – naming male and female in his list of ‘pairs’ who are one in Christ and equally heirs of God’s promise (Gal 3.26-29).

7 Andrea Dworkin, quoted in Bentley, “Justice”, 163

8 Bentley, “Justice”, 163

9 See e.g. the story of Zacchaeus whose restoration to the community is described as “salvation”.

Understanding humanness in this way challenges arguments that the Bible or Christian faith gives a person the right to abuse or oppress another person (or that oppression can be justified) by gender or social status or ethnicity. We are connected and obligated to each other through this shared identity.

The gospel condemns any violence by one image bearer against another. In the Hebrew scriptures, 'non-violence' is a mark of the anticipated kingdom. "Then the wolf will live with the sheep, and the leopard lie down with the kid". In fact, "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain." (Isaiah 11:6, 9) A good society is marked with justice, care for the poor and vulnerable, and hope for the oppressed.¹⁰

Whether sin is seen as social evil evidenced in unjust social and economic structures, or as individual responsibility requiring individual repentance and conversion (or both), violence is a fundamental fracturing of these core elements of humanity.

'Othering', that is objectification of another, or seeing a person as a thing or as less than ourselves, often results in violence. "And such objectification can always be found operating not only at the level of individual relationships, but in the wider context of social injustice and unequal power, which serve in term to undergird, goad, and/or reinforce individual acts of harm and violation."¹¹ The result is the use of control and power to dominate another person.¹²

Justice for the oppressed, and care for the vulnerable, is also a mark of Jesus' teaching. One clear example is the parable of the "Good Samaritan".¹³

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.

"Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"...

The parable which follows undermines expectations of roles (Priest, Levite and Samaritan), and of who the object of neighbourly love should be (the individual with no name or ethnic identity who is the victim of a crime).

DFV AND GENDER PERSPECTIVES

Because over 75% of Domestic Violence is committed by men, issues of socialised maleness¹⁴ (including 'biblical manhood'¹⁵), and cultural understandings of maleness and gender relationships need to be examined carefully¹⁶ for their contribution to power imbalances and domestic violence. Socialised maleness, which includes understandings of the roles of men in the home, sports, and workplaces – and associated power dynamics - cannot be ignored in discussions of family violence. Cooper-White claims that,

"[all] men are socialised, to greater or lesser degrees, about what it means to be men. The Oakland Men's Project calls it the "Act Like A Man" box. Men are not only indoctrinated into the beliefs represented by the "box," but they're boxed in by it. It's confining limits cut away parts of men's humanity and deprive them of the full human range of feeling, experience, and happiness,..."¹⁷

10 See also e.g. Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Micah 6:6-8

11 Pamela Cooper-White. *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church's Response*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2012, 260

12 "The Bible views this as sin ([Mal. 2:16-17](#); [Ps 11:5](#); [Col. 3:19](#)) — even when it is only verbal ([Prov. 12:18](#); [18:21](#); [Col. 3:8](#))" <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/domestic-family-violence-biblical-theological-resources/>


13 See also e.g. Matt 5:38-48; Matt 25:31-46

14 <https://jss.org.au/what-we-do/the-mens-project/the-man-box/>

15 <https://www.desiringgod.org/topics/manhood-and-womanhood#>

16 E.g. Aimee Byrd's *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Biblical Womanhood*, <https://www.amazon.com.au/Recovering-Biblical-Manhood-Womanhood-Rediscover/dp/0310108713>

17 Cooper-White, *Tamar*, 205-206



Many reasons are espoused for this kind of behaviour, “however, the root cause is always power, control, and domination as a defence against helplessness, pain, or need and a social system that teaches men that they have the right to maintain authority over “their” woman - or all women.”¹⁸

Theological examination of gender stereotypes needs to include questions of equality, power, honest exegesis of scripture, and culture (including an exegesis of that culture). This includes careful examination and use of marriage liturgies, preaching on scriptural texts of abuse and violence or some of the household codes in the New Testament (see below, ‘Liturgical and Pastoral Practice’).

Interpretations of the Bible which place men over women have added to this problem. In some cases, interpretations of texts use the patriarchal structure of ancient Israel as the standard for all communities (including present day); Others misunderstand the social struggle of the early church as normative for all societies; Still others remove the text from the original context of sexualised idol worship, or cultural dress codes.

Modern concerns about an over-sexualised society are too easily confused with ancient texts and a (male) desire for power and control. A modern version of this is ‘Complementarianism’, “that oscillates between chivalry and chauvinism, between seeing women to be feared for their powers of seduction yet also aggressively controlled in want of sexual gratification, where women are dangerous Jezebels yet also a live-in concubine to be sexually enjoyed.”¹⁹

DFV IN THE HOME AND SOCIETY

Alongside this understanding of equality of individuals is the comprehension of social location and cohesion in human community. Sexual abuse and Domestic Violence take place *in* society... in a community. And when they do, that community is broken or damaged.

“We are called by the gospel to restore right relation, not just between individual men and women... but in the sense of the whole community, the whole church, the whole society – even, as Paul says, the world (kosmos).

We are called by baptism to be re-concilers, that is, restorers of the Concilium, the whole community of God.”²⁰

Domestic Violence primarily happens ‘behind closed doors’ in the home. Secrecy, whether because of shame or guilt or loyalty, enables this violence to continue. Knowing that domestic abuse is unacceptable, perpetrators believe that they can get away with violence in the hidden privacy of their homes.

In our society, ‘justice’ is often seen as something that happens in public, and ‘love’ is something that happens in private. For this reason, some feminist theologians argue for a ‘ethic of relationship’ that seeks “to recast the relationship between love and justice in order that both norms may be appropriated by social ethicists in such a way as to unify the formerly separate arenas of private and public life.”²¹ The insight into social expectations and discourse is helpful in shining a light on these perceptions. It does not mean, however, that justice and love are necessarily separated this way in scripture. Other scholars will argue that love and justice are intertwined in the bible, and expected of God’s people in public and private. These insights can be part of publically highlighting a gospel response to DFV, in justice-related action, bible study groups and in Sunday worship.

Domestic and Family Violence contradicts the bible’s view of true humanity and a good society – that is, a society marked by equality, love, care and respect. Therefore the Christian community should be a place where DFV is named and addressed, where perpetrators are challenged and survivors are given a safe place.

18 Cooper-White, *Tamar*, 207

19 https://michaelfbird.substack.com/p/ill-say-it-certain-theologies-enable?r=ilx28&s=w&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web

20 Cooper-White, *Tamar*, 261

21 Bentley, “Justice” 160



Thinking Theologically – Interpreting the community and Scripture

“... ‘good theology’ must inform and be informed by both healing and liberation, and therefore must be relevant to, and ultimately grounded in, practises of community.”²²

That there are “[b]odies ... broken day after day on linked wheels of poverty, prostitution, sexual abuse and domestic violence”²³ must make our theological task both urgent and humble – recognising that our theology can be used to bring violence or healing. An outcome of thinking theologically about DFV should be liberating action and empowerment, not simply skill enhancement or abstract reflection. We must also recognise that while domestic violence is most often carried out in private, our theology must be examined and lived out in private *and* in community – for that is the place where we can be accountable to live out our calling with those who are most vulnerable.

One way to approach this task is therefore to describe and understand ourselves, including our community’s historical understandings of its context and the scriptures. When we begin with the lived experience of our community, our collective task is more urgent and real. It also has the possibility of reshaping a church community as one that is more life-giving and transformative.

“...While by no means ignoring exegetical inquiry, we need to start instead with questions of a different kind, such as: what is our experience as men and women in church in society today? and, what kind of people do we need to be in order to interpret wisely what the Bible says, in a way which is life-giving in the realm of gender and sexuality?”²⁴

Attention to ‘lived experience’ can reduce any tendency for biases or assumptions to go unchallenged or unspoken. A community which is reading scripture could ask;

- ▶ Who is reading the text?
- ▶ Whose voices are raised and heard in the reading of the text?
- ▶ What is the context in which the text is read?

Allowing the stories of lived experience to hold us to account for our attitudes and relational patterns can reduce the danger of reading scripture through the captivity of our tribal interests – whether they are ethnic, theological or sociological. As a community we can then ask ourselves; ‘Have we mis-read scripture? Have we lived our cultural norms without critique? Have we assumed that DFV doesn’t happen in our community / church / neighbourhood?’

This matrix of questions can produce a range of interpretations of any text depending on the mix of these factors. Black, womanist, feminist, liberation and other intersectional theologies are a result of particular intersections of reading scripture in mixed settings.

Part of understanding lived experience is understanding our own cultural context in Australia. Australian society thrives on a story of colonisation that is often bash, iconoclastic, male-dominated, marinated in alcohol, gambling and team sports, is aggressive and physical – often praised for its violence. At the same time it understands that

22 Cooper-White, *Tamar*, 22

23 Stephen C. Barton. “Is the Bible Good news for Human Sexuality? Reflections on Method in Biblical Interpretation.” *In Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*, by Adrian Thatcher and Elizabeth Stuart. Herefordshire: Gracewing. 1996. 10

24 Barton, “Good News”, 10-11



it exists on and because of this untamable 'sunburnt country', and continues to struggle with its past as penal colony, with its settler and colonising practices. Migrants to Australia bring other stories which merge with the wider colonised story, adding to the rich tapestry of who we are becoming – and sometimes challenging our unconsidered beliefs about ourselves. Communal theological conversations should include these stories and contexts in any discussion of DFV.

It is also important that difficult biblical texts are thoughtfully considered, and not avoided.²⁵ Sensitivity is required when examining problematic passages, as opening these passages can be triggering for those who have experienced abuse, as well as those whose identity may be threatened or challenged by an alternate reading of the text.

Thinking theologically, listening to the lived experience of those around us, should make us aware that there are many ways of interpreting scripture - and 'discerning the body'.

Allowing honest questions to emerge gives a genuine place to explore difficult texts – like those containing terror in the Old Testament or Paul's words about husbands, wives and marriage in the New Testament (e.g. Ephesians 5:22-24). Reading the wider scriptural context, understanding the setting, discerning the writers' perspectives and even allowing questions to be unanswered can all help in the task of thinking theologically in community. Several of the items in the Resources section give practical ideas on how to do this and what to be aware of.²⁶

Christian Communities can, and should be, places of healing, safety, open discussion of issues like DFV, and where perpetrators are held to account. However biblical interpretations are sometimes used to justify perspectives or attitudes that can lead to violence in the home.

"Think of the Bible's exhortation to forgiveness, the sacredness of marriage, love of enemies, or even humility (a virtue closely related to the Bible's notion of submission). All of these could be misused in relationships; the beauty of the ideas is not invalidated by the ways in which they can be exploited or abused."²⁷

While these theological positions do not directly cause violence, they can be used to justify positions that would be otherwise unsustainable, or to support violent attitudes or actions that are endemic in wider (Australian) society.

Theological engagement on its own is not a 'fix' for DFV, but can helpfully use the tools already available to a community to open the subject, alongside resources provided by churches and community groups.²⁸ As churches we are often uniquely placed to address issues of justice, oppression and human relationships in our public worship and liturgy.

25 This paper does not allow space to consider them in depth, however the resources section points to accessible resources to facilitate these conversations. (e.g. Pamela Cooper-White's *The Cry of Tamar*; Helen Conway's *Domestic Violence and the Church* pp50-60)

26 E.g. The Safer Resource from Common Grace; <https://www.saferresource.org.au/the-bible-on-domestic-family-violence>; The Interfaith Resource from Shahib Manal <https://www.wire.org.au/preventing-and-responding-to-family-violence-a-faith-leaders-practice-guide-and-toolkit/> Pp 42-45.

27 Natasha Moore and John Dickson, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-12/moore-dickson-the-church-must-confront-domestic-abuse/6300342> 2015

28 e.g. <https://safechurch.ucavictas.org.au/family-violence/> ; <https://www.saferresource.org.au/>

Liturgical and pastoral practice

*If secrecy is at the heart of the evil of sexual abuse, then the act of reminding a survivor that there are no secrets too deep to be hidden from God's healing power is a sacramental act. Nothing is unknown to God, even if it is unknown to the survivor. God's healing can reach the most shrouded places in the soul...*²⁹

LITURGY

James Ward writes that "Christian ritual is healing because it rehearses and re-enacts our culture's central story of liberation. The story ... involves a baby who survives the infanticidal designs of an evil king and grows up to be called and empowered as liberator of God's oppressed people."³⁰ Christian liturgical practice includes weekly worship, rituals in birth, baptism, marriage or death, blessings of homes and relationships, as well as collective acknowledgement of community trauma and broken relationships.

The marriage service is one place where a Christian theology of home is expressed. While not all family relationships are built around a marriage, the UCA Marriage Service³¹ contains a summary of the church's understanding of God's love, home and relationships of trust and love.

- ▶ Marriage is founded in God's loving nature, and in the covenant of love made with us in Christ.
- ▶ Two people, in giving themselves to each other in love, reflect the love of Christ for his Church.
- ▶ In Christian marriage, couples are called to live together faithfully, and to love each other with respect, tenderness and delight.
- ▶ They share the life of a home and may be entrusted with the gift and care of children.
- ▶ They help to shape a society in which human dignity and happiness may flourish and abound.

These words describe a home life that has purposes which are common across all committed relationships ... respect, tenderness and delight; sharing the life of a home; helping shape a society where dignity and happiness may "flourish and abound".

It is also, however, in the context of home that family and domestic violence occur – and in which almost every aspect of that committed relationship (described in the marriage service as 'a gift of God and a means of grace'), is undermined, destroyed, or abused.

Christian theology challenges us to live into the love of God, and to hold oppression and sin to account wherever it may occur. Rituals like the marriage service do not hide from brokenness of relationships, but call the community back to its common understanding of the love, trust and hope that is expressed in family relationships.

A recent study of Intimate Partner Violence in Australia notes that "discourses such as marriage as a covenant, the equality of partners in a marriage, and God's mercy and love can help to empower victim-survivors to extricate themselves from abusive relationships."³²

This includes themes such as;

- ▶ Marriage is a covenant between two parties and requires two parties to uphold it.
- ▶ The partners in a marriage are equal and there is no place for one partner controlling the other.
- ▶ God is merciful and loving and would support a partner leaving their abusive relationship.
- ▶ God does not want vulnerable people to suffer.

Australian victim-survivors told researchers in this study that it helped when Christian teachings about marriage and gender were communicated in ways that actively address the potential for, and the reality of, abuse in intimate relationships. They also said that Churches also provide places of or spaces for relationship – providing trusting relationships, genuine care, support and a reduction in social isolation.

29 Cooper-White, *Tamar*, 192

30 James Ward "Ritual and Healing:" 4, quoted in Cooper-White, *Tamar*, 250.

31 [https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/marriage/2018/Uniting%20Church%20in%20Australia%20Additional%20Marriage%20Liturgy%20\(2018\).pdf](https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/marriage/2018/Uniting%20Church%20in%20Australia%20Additional%20Marriage%20Liturgy%20(2018).pdf)

32 R. Powell & M. Pepper. "National Anglican Family Violence Research Report: Top Line Results." NCLS Research Report. NCLS Research.(2021). 19 <https://anglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NAFVP-Top-Line-Results-Report-NCLS-Research.pdf>

Churches were also found to be places of safety and healing, a place to nurture and new self-identity, and to reengage their spiritual lives and relationship with God.³³

PASTORAL

Spiritual communities play a significant role in bringing healing in the face of injustice. “As the Church, we are called to join this movement to break silence and to restore justice.”³⁴ Scripture and platitudes have too-often been misused in pastoral settings. We have mis-interpreted scripture and our own rituals in ways that disempower women in relationships.

A role of pastoral ministry (from the pulpit and in community settings) is to name these abuses of scripture and their associated ‘morality’ as untrue and blasphemous. However, “... It is [also] the work of the congregation - in actions as well as words - to assure the victim-survivor of God’s love and to provide her with an opportunity to build a spiritual support community for herself. Much of this work is in simply witnessing to the larger truths of violence against women and the objectification of oppressed groups. It is the work of making a parish a safe place where confidences are kept but destructive secrets are eradicated.”³⁵

Pamela Cooper-White in her significant book *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church’s Response* encourages churches to become educated and engaged as communities in offering care, healing and hope for victim-survivors, as well as holding perpetrators to account. She names several steps in this ministry:³⁶

- ▶ to see and hear the truth about violence against women and children, and the vulnerability of many in our congregations;
- ▶ we must name the violence as violence (and hear the stories of victim-survivors);
- ▶ we must mobilise our anger beyond helplessness and beyond sympathy to justice for victim-survivors;
- ▶ finally we are called to restore right relation not just between individuals but in the sense of the whole community the whole church the whole society this is the work of reconciliation to which we are called.

In these and other ways our pastoral practice and discipleship can acknowledge this violence, offer care for survivor-victims and commit ourselves to speaking truth and justice. Christian communities can work alongside police, victim-support agencies and other professionals to be part of a society-wide response to the evil of DFV.

This is not to say that healing is easy or should be taken on lightly or easily solved with words, rituals or liturgy. There is a long hard road for a Christian community towards understanding family and domestic violence, the issues for victims and perpetrators, and its own place in both complicity and healing. However, all of this is built on deep caring relationships between people and a commitment to live out the love and justice of God.

Living into Justice

The title of Cooper-White’s concluding chapter is “Reconciliation: moving beyond individual forgiveness to communal justice.” She goes on to explain what she means by forgiveness - that is what forgiveness is and what it isn’t, when it is cheap and when it is costly, when it is a gift of grace and when it truly is reconciliation - the restoring of a community.

Cooper-White is at pains to say again and again that reconciliation cannot be rushed - and in fact it may never happen.

“It is at heart an eschatological perspective. Jesus prophetic ministry was radical precisely because he lived and taught in Kairos time: eternity in this moment, now! Salvation, liberation, the realm of God is here! We are all, as a community, called to repent, that is turn to turn around, because in Jesus words, Kingdom of God is already here. And we must turn to see it - and then to do it and be it. We are finally called to do justice, not to make God’s realm happen, but to live in the realm that is already in God’s Kairos time around us, in us, and through us.”³⁷

33 Summary of Powell and Pepper, “Anglican Family Violence” 20-22

34 Cooper-White, *Tamar*, 246

35 Cooper-White, *Tamar*, 246

36 Cooper-White, *Tamar*, 246-247

37 Cooper-White, *Tamar*, 261



I Resource list *For Congregations and Church Leaders*

"Preventing and Responding to Family Violence: A Faith Leader's Practice Guide and Toolkit" is an Interfaith resource for Faith Community leaders produced by Manal Shehab for [Wire](https://www.wire.org.au/preventing-and-responding-to-family-violence-a-faith-leaders-practice-guide-and-toolkit/) and [Sisters 4 Sisters](https://www.wire.org.au/preventing-and-responding-to-family-violence-a-faith-leaders-practice-guide-and-toolkit/) in 2022. <https://www.wire.org.au/preventing-and-responding-to-family-violence-a-faith-leaders-practice-guide-and-toolkit/>

[Safer](https://www.wire.org.au/preventing-and-responding-to-family-violence-a-faith-leaders-practice-guide-and-toolkit/) is a resource produced by [Common Grace](https://www.wire.org.au/preventing-and-responding-to-family-violence-a-faith-leaders-practice-guide-and-toolkit/) as part of its Justice work. It offers reflections on theological and church perspectives, as well as pastoral resources for lay and recognised ministers. (Common Grace 2019)

UCA Assembly has produced a resource for UCA Congregations to educate and upskill congregations and church leaders in recognising and dealing with Domestic and Family Violence:

- ▶ "Beyond Violence: A resource on Domestic and Family Violence" (2021) https://uniting.church/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/DFV-Report_FINAL_web.pdf

UCA Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Safe Church Unit has produced a resource for UCA Congregations to educate and upskill congregations and church leaders in recognising and dealing with Domestic and Family Violence:

- ▶ UCA VicTas Synod, Safe Church unit. (2022) Family Violence resource kit. (Available in English, Fijian, Korean, Samoan, Tongan) <https://safechurch.ucavictas.org.au/family-violence/>

I Additional Reading **Recommended*

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