

## Understanding the Transformation Process: The Interface Between Grace, Justice, Accountability and Healing

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### Preface and Acknowledgements

In developing this paper, I have drawn heavily upon some of my published work, most notably, *No Place for Abuse: Practical and Biblical Responses to Domestic Violence* (with Catherine Clark Kroeger, InterVarsity Press, 2001; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, in press, 2010), *Refuge from Abuse: Hope and Healing for Abused Religion Women* (with Catherine Clark Kroeger, InterVarsity Press, 2004), *The Battered Wife: How Christians Confront Family Violence* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), and recent articles in *Critical Social Work* (2009), *Christianity and Social Work* (2009) and *The Journal of Family Ministries* (2010).

God has been so faithful to me and my family. And to whom much has been given, I understand from the Scriptures, much will be required. Living a peaceful, fulfilled life at home enables me to focus on those robbed of this experience in my research and writing. I am also grateful to the Wesleyan Church and its leadership for taking this issue seriously and for inviting me on several occasions to be part of the dialogue. At the last General Conference, a motion was adopted that spoke out against domestic violence and encouraged pastors to adopt professional best practices in response to its suffering. In the presentation that follows, I share some of my research, thoughts, hopes and sorrow about the transformation process as I have observed it over the years. I have entitled these reflections the interface between grace, justice, accountability and healing for I believe that it is at the intersections of life, and of concepts, that we move just that much closer to the challenges and the joys of our complicated existence.

My prayer:

*We ask, O Lord,  
that you would open our eyes to see  
the suffering of women and of men around the world.  
Give us ears to hear their cries  
and hearts that will not rest  
until we have done our part  
to apply the healing balm of Gilead to their wounds.  
Amen.*

### Introduction

Violence against women is a reality—in every part of the world, in every neighbourhood and in every church. Rich women, poor women, black women, white women, educated women, illiterate women, religious women, beautiful women—women who are abused in the family context come from all sectors of society. This should sound out a wake-up call for us as Christians across the nation and around the globe. But it does not. Often we are not interested in speaking out against this evil amongst us.

Some will say, are not men victims too? Of course, some men are. Others will say, are not women sometimes the aggressors? Of course, sometimes they are. And sometimes the victims are children and teens. And sometimes children and teens are the aggressors. For those who are interested, there is a mountain of data that points to the prevalence and seriousness of woman abuse and intimate partner violence—it occurs in every country with shocking regularity (see Kroeger and Nason-Clark, 2010 for an update of the statistics worldwide).

The church and its leaders have a responsibility to speak out—we call that the prophetic voice. Moreover, the church and its leaders have a responsibility to show compassion—we call that doing what Jesus would do—applying the healing balm of Gilead to the wounds of those inside or beyond the household of faith. So why are we waiting?

The time has come. It is time to speak out against the evil of domestic violence, time to heal the broken-hearted, time to call those who offend to accountability, time to reflect on why violence is so pervasive in our communities and in our churches. Indeed, the time has come! In part, that is why we are about to assemble—to discuss issues of holiness and transformed living.

### Scriptures to consider:

As we begin to focus on the issue of domestic violence, it is important to meditate on some Bible passages that help us to see our mandate clearly.

Selected scripture verses that help victims:

Psalm 9:9 — *The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.*

Psalm 34:18 — *The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

Psalm 103:6 — *The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.*

Selected scripture verses that challenge abusive acts:

Psalm 11:15 — *The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates.*

Proverbs 3:31 — *Do not envy a violent man or choose any of his ways.*

Selected scripture verses that bring comfort to those who are hurting:

Joshua 1:9 — *Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*

Psalm 46:1-3 — *God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.*

Jeremiah 29:11 — *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

Scripture that calls religious people to speak out:

Jeremiah 21:12 — *This is what the LORD says to you, house of David: “Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hands of their oppressors those who have been robbed, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done—burn with no one to quench it.*

### **The Challenge: Steps to Understand the Transformation Process**

The first step in attempting to understand the transformation process, from my point of view, is to listen to those impacted by some part of a transformation process. In the case of my work and research, this is the story of domestic violence—what happens when abuse strikes the Christian family? We can talk about this from the point of view of the victim/survivor, or from the point of view of the offender, or from a criminal justice perspective—say the experience of police, or parole, or judges, or from a therapeutic perspective—the experience of a psychologist or social worker, or from an advocacy point of view—like a worker at a transition house for battered women, or from a pastoral perspective. There are many ways to look into the window of transformation in order to understand the process more fully and its complexities more clearly.

I begin by sharing some stories that come from my fieldwork across North America and in many other places around the globe.

Chris Holland has just switched careers and recently changed marriage partners. He is almost 40, teaches science to junior high students, and lives under the same roof as his seven children in a blended family situation. In the aftermath of a violent incident, Chris sought help in a faith-based batterer intervention program because his wife was unwilling to allow him to return home unless he agreed to go to classes. His wife, employed as a physiotherapist, learns of the agency through her Christian friends. Desperate, Chris is willing to do anything that would get him back in the house. From his perspective, he is better than other men in the program, many who have been mandated by the courts to attend. Often in conversation Chris uses religious language and Scriptural references. He wants to intimidate, but since the facilitators at the program know this language too, this dismantles his power.

Chris talks about being unequally yoked with his wife, a reference to the Biblical notion that they do not share the same worldview or theological beliefs. But this is not exactly how Chris is using the term. Rather, he is referring to the fact that his wife called 911, involved the police and the courts, and is now considering divorce, something from his perspective that Christians should never do. He does not deny that she is a Christian—but he firmly believes that she is not living the way he feels a Christian should live. And in Chris' world, everything is either right, or it is wrong.

Before he began attending classes at the intervention program, the Hollands sought help at their church. But Chris was not happy with the pastoral counsel they received. He wanted their minister to invoke church discipline against his wife and make public their marital woes. When the pastor would not collaborate with this plan, Chris left the church. Interestingly, he credits the faith-based program and its staff for their humility, but he criticizes it for not being religious enough. According to Chris, staff should simply tell pastors what to do and when they see pastors making errors of judgment in terms of counseling, they should reprimand them.

Coming from a very conservative Protestant tradition, Chris feels fully empowered as a lay person to interpret the Scriptures without any particular guidance from the ordained leadership. With his father serving as a

pastor, Chris grew up in a household that he claims was very strict and orderly. He laments that this is not the case in his own household. As he speaks about family life, it appears that there is excessive rigidity and very little fun.

When we return to interview Chris for a third time, many months later, he has left the program.

Bill is a 40-something, soft-spoken, manual labourer who has always held steady employment. He has lived in several US locations, which might be interpreted as running from his problems. *I have had a problem with substance abuse in my life, there's a lot of alcoholism and drug addiction.*

Drugs and alcohol controlled Bill for many years. Under their influence, he got into trouble with the law. For a while he would stop drinking whiskey and using cocaine, but before long Bill would reconnect with old friends or co-workers and find himself sliding down the slippery slope to regular use and then despair. It was a downward spiral from which it did not seem he could escape.

He came into contact with a faith-based batterer intervention program after 15 months in prison for domestic violence. *I had domestic issue problems in my life many different times with my partner of 13 years and I ended up going to prison.*

Once his sentence had been served, Bill was sent to a small community-based program for men who abuse intimate partners. He did not connect well with the facilitators there and in fact claimed he would rather return to jail than complete the requirements of the program. In desperation, he sought the advice of Greg, his probation officer: *he was the first person that gave me any hope.*

Based on conversations with him, Bill chose to attend a faith-based intervention program *because of my faith, faith-based and I made the right choice.*

Here Bill found exactly what he needed: a program and a facilitation team that believed he could be a better man than he had been in the past. He found the approach helpful and the environment conducive to change. *I felt comfortable the first time I came here and a lot of it has to do with the way [the facilitator] does class you know. I have made some big changes in my life though since then.*

*I realized I wasn't living my life the way God intended me to live my life and when I came to that realization and that surrender, it's like God removed the blinders from me... Everything I have learned from past treatments and all the years of going to NA [Narcotics Anonymous] and AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] all made sense to me for the first time in my life and I started being honest with people...it's all in God's plan, that's all I can figure...I give my life to the Lord everyday...it's been a blessing, the Lord has blessed me and I am on the verge of getting custody of my daughter back...by God's grace alone, because I know I could never have done it. And it's by doing the next right thing, by being honest, by being accountable, by living on life's terms and doing the right thing rather than hiding in a bottle which I did from the time I was 14 years old...*

Through the program—learning life skills and by continued accountability—Bill lives each day through the lens that all he has gained could be quickly lost. *I just live my life one day at a time... And it is a big struggle. It's like the old cliché, you have to be sick and tired of being sick and tired. And until you get to that point, until you have made that decision on your own, you can't do it...hope is to me, it's like this is my thing on hope—helping other people every day. That gives hope.*

He speaks at length about the way in which hope has been translated into action in his own life. *It's hard, every individual is different...nobody hands you anything, you have to work for it and I am going to tell you something else—when you have led lives like most of these men led and I have led myself, it takes time, it doesn't happen overnight, you have to prove yourself, you have to show by your actions on a daily basis...*

Hope is a central construct in Bill's struggle to keep clean, sober and abuse-free. If he is successful, he believes the reward will be obtaining custody of his daughter, who is living temporarily with one of Bill's siblings, under state supervision.

"Can hope really change people?" "Is transformation evidenced-based?" The answer depends on who you ask. It also depends on how you translate hope into action.

### **The Data on Men Who Participate in Faith-Based Batterer Intervention Programs**

Justice, accountability and change are all imperative features of intervention services offered to men who abuse their wives or intimate partners. While some come voluntarily, most men who attend batterer intervention classes do so because they have little or no choice in the matter—they have been mandated by the courts as a result of a conviction of domestic violence, or referred by wives, therapists and/or clergy as a final gasp before the relationship is considered dead.

Religious women, in particular, are very hopeful that intervention programs can change violent men. Since many abused *religious* women do not wish to terminate their relationship with the abuser—either temporarily or forever—they hold out great faith that if only their partner were to attend such a program, the violence would cease and peace would be restored to the marriage. But is there any evidence upon which to base such hope?

In the first ever attempt to document empirically the characteristics of men who sought assistance from a faith-based batterers' intervention program in the United States, we analyzed over 1000 closed case files. Comparing this data to men in secular programs revealed that the faith-based program had a higher proportion of men who had witnessed or experienced abuse in their childhood homes, while rates of alcohol abuse and criminal histories were similar (Nancy Nason-Clark et al., 2003). Another finding to emerge from this data is the role of clergy in encouraging or "mandating" men who seek their spiritual help to attend a faith-based intervention program. In fact, men who were clergy referred were more likely to complete (and graduate from) the 26 week program (followed by the six month monitoring phase) than those whose attendance was mandated by a judge (Fisher-Townsend et al., 2008). Since the faith-based program participants have more life stability factors (currently married, employed, higher education, etc.) this may reinforce their willingness to complete the program and to alter their abusive ways (Nancy Nason-Clark et al., 2003). Sharing a religious worldview with the other men in the program may actually provide a *safe place* for these abusive men to challenge themselves, and each other, and look toward a day when their abusive past will no longer control their present reality (N. Nason-Clark, 2004).

While the case file study helps us to understand some of the features that differentiated faith-based and secular, community-based batterer intervention programs, it could not offer us much in the way of explaining how religious men who act abusively think about their violence or their journey towards healing and hope. For the last five years, we have been collecting data at another faith-based agency, located in an adjacent state in the north-west corner of the United States. Here we chose to conduct focus groups and personal interviews with men engaged in the program and to re-contact those we had interviewed each time we returned to the agency.

In *Acting Abusively: Faith, Hope and Charity in the Lives of Violent Men*, a book Barbara Fisher-Townsend and I are currently completing, the men whose lives we seek to describe talk freely—albeit intermittently—about God, faith and their spiritual quest.<sup>1</sup> Like Chris Holland, whose story is highlighted above, some men in the program do not complete the entire 52 week program and "graduate." Rather, they drop-out, or attend only periodically—when a crisis occurs or an ultimatum is given. Those who are court-mandated must complete 52 classes or face the implications of their non-compliance. In this state-certified program, there are several groups a week, each with at least 15 men and two facilitators. The curriculum is not dissimilar to that of a secular program, but the agency's staff includes only men and women committed to their Christian faith. When issues of spirituality, or religion, or the Bible are raised by the men, the facilitators respond using the language of their various faith traditions. They are knowledgeable about the Bible and well prepared to counter any claims made by program participants that Scripture justifies abuse or violent acts. They hold men accountable using both secular and religious insights. And for men of faith, this is very powerful. Here a man's religious ideology is harnessed in ways that have the potential to nurture, monitor and reinforce a violent-free future.

When they begin the program, most of the men are unwilling—and some are unable—to interpret their acts as abusive. *I am not violent* is a common phrase used by the men in their early days of program attendance (Fisher-Townsend et al., 2008). Some interweave spiritual overtones in a direct way, like Chris. They talk about submission, or authority, or hierarchy in the family. But most talk only indirectly about these issues, choosing instead references to how she *pushed their buttons*. As others have observed, there is great reluctance amongst batterers to assume responsibility for their actions (Ptacek, 1988b; Scott & Wolfe, 2000). Men both justify what they have meted out to their partner and blame her for the abuse. Essentially, most of the men believe, at least in the early days of coming to the agency, that they are entitled to certain things in a relationship and angry when their expectations are not met.

As the men we have interviewed reflect back to their childhood, teen years, trouble with the law, altercations with adults, relationships at school, friendships and the early days of intimacy, there is a sense that for many—but not all—life has occurred at the margins of the broader society. There is a shared experience of feeling "left out," or at least not being able to be well integrated at school, at home, and within the communities where they lived. Sometimes, their faith background and church attendance helped to ease these strains: sometimes not. For some men we interviewed, there was a point when, during or after the group, they realized they had become just like their own father. This realization offered both a reminder of their abusive past—together with all its ugliness and personal pain—and a resignation about the future.

There was a small group of men whose stories involved overcoming enormous obstacles on their journey toward healing and accountability. They reported how it was very hard work coming to group each week, engaging in sustained talk about your failures, and learning about—and deciding to use—tools that might help you to change how you think and how you act. There are stories of hope amongst the men, but these are muted by ample evidence of failures, tragic choices and despair. When religious leaders are able to walk alongside abusive men and their families, the possibilities of ongoing accountability are enhanced. It is very powerful for a man who has acted abusively to see his faith community as supportive of his decision to change and pursue wholeness. In this way, pastors and other religious leaders are uniquely positioned to augment the process of recovery.

For social workers, psychologists, physicians and other involved in the helping professions, it is critical to see the centrality of the religious belief system for many men who have acted abusively. It is a key component of their social context (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1998; Ptacek, 1988a), used to justify or defend their proclivity to power and control (Bancroft, 2002; Gondolf, 2002). Concepts such as submission reinforce these notions of religious entitlement (Shupe, Stacey, & Hazlewood, 1987). In this way, religious leaders and faith-enriched therapeutic staff are unique resources in any community-based efforts to create safe and peaceful homes. For Chris Holland and others like him, faith is a core construct, central to any understanding of male entitlement, power and control.

### **A Survivor's Story**

Mildred<sup>2</sup> and Russell Jennings lived one life on the outside and another at home. They had five grown children, all of whom had been very successful in their chosen careers. While this older couple was sliding further and further into debt, to outsiders it appeared that they had everything they needed and wanted. The truth was that Russell hungered after power and status, and satisfied his longings with purchases, like new cars and other flashy gadgets. He gave little thought to Mildred or her needs.

Mildred, whose mother lived with them, was shy and retiring by nature. She was very involved in her church and at home overly concerned to please her husband. Russell was a very controlling man and Mildred's response to his control was to try harder and harder to please him. In fact, she felt caught between the very real needs of her aged mother and her husband's unrealistic demands. He tried to control every small detail of her life, including where she went and with whom. When she resisted his control, he would adopt one of two strategies: start yelling and belittle her; or turn silent. On one occasion he flew into a rage and tried to kill her.

But Mildred was very forgiving of Russell, trying to live a life where she exemplified the Scriptural imperative to forgive seventy-times-seven. Not surprisingly, Mildred suffered from low self esteem. This was compounded by a childhood experience of watching her father treat her mother poorly—a pattern that had occurred between her maternal grandparents as well.

Mildred sought pastoral assistance when Russell kicked her out of their house, together with her 83 year old mother. In fact, these two older women were given two hours to leave the family home forever. In desperation she contacted her pastor because she had nowhere else to go. In turn, the pastor found temporary shelter for the women with another family from the church who owned a large farmhouse.

In the aftermath of the crisis, she had so many unanswered questions: (1) Where was God at her point of need? (2) Would she ever be forgiven for leaving her husband? (3) Should she forgive him one last time? Through counseling, the pastor recognized Mildred's spiritual needs and her misguided religious convictions related to forgiveness and suffering. He helped her to see that God was not asking her to ignore the pain and the abuse of the past, but rather to hold Russell accountable for his actions. Then, the pastor helped legal counsel understand why Mildred was so forgiving of the abusive acts of her husband. In Mildred's case, the pastor acted as a mediator between her spiritual questions and her practical problems. Her erroneous religious thinking he tried to challenge and he offered a needed spiritual supplement to what others in the community offered her in terms of safety and respite.

For over two years, the pastor had regular contact with Mildred—sometimes by phone, sometimes in person. Her spiritual journey towards healing and wholeness was augmented by a religious leader who was willing to listen, offer practical advice and hear her cry for spiritual help.

Similar to many of the hundreds of stories of abuse we have heard over the last twenty years, told by survivors and those who have walked alongside them, Mildred's spiritual needs were primary on her road to personal well-being. Like a shattered window, she felt her life as she knew it had been blown apart. Yet, the pastor and other community-based professionals, such as her lawyer, helped Mildred to pick up the pieces of her broken life and reclaim strength and safety.

Mildred placed the intact family in high regard. Like so many highly committed religious women, she was very reluctant to leave her husband and to seek alternative solutions for her personal safety and emotional health. She felt that she had promised to love and honor her husband until death. In a fashion similar to other abused religious women, she felt it was her responsibility to keep on forgiving, to keep on trying to salvage the marriage, and to never give up hope that her husband might change.

Through our research we have found that most religious women who are abused do not consider themselves to be battered wives. In fact, Julie Owens, a nationally recognized DV trainer and herself a survivor, tells part of her story where after her husband had been charged with murder and sent to prison, she heard about a program for battered wives in the state of Hawaii and called to see if she might come. She told the advocate on the telephone, "I am not a battered wife, but my husband tried to kill me..."<sup>3</sup>

The resources that religious women seek in the aftermath of domestic violence in part differentiate them from other abused women. They are often very reluctant to seek secular, community-based sources of support, preferring to look to others of like-minded faith for assistance—pastors and lay alike<sup>4</sup>. Since many faith communities place the intact family on a pedestal, religious women are especially prone to blame themselves for the abuse, believe they have promised God to stay married until death, and experience both the fear and reality of rejection at church when attempts to repair the relationship fail.

Many Christian women who have been victimized turn to their pastors for help. Yet, most clergy are reluctant to name the behavior of a violent man toward his wife for what it is; they would rather interpret the conflict as relational and the partners as equally responsible to seek help and resolution. Pastors prefer to see persistent verbal abuse as a couple's problem with communication and to downplay the economic and social dependency that a married woman often experiences. Ministers are slow to recognize unrestrained male power in a relationship, though they are usually decisive in their condemnation of violent physical outbursts.

Women believers, on the other hand, are far more likely than their leaders to understand the nature and severity of violence and to grasp the long-term consequences in the lives of victims. In part this is because Christian women have learned about the frequency and impact of wife abuse through the lives of their daughters, mothers and friends. Consequently, evangelical women are more likely to criticize the failure of the church and its leaders to respond compassionately to the problem than to condemn a woman's failure to leave an abusive relationship or to blame women for choosing their husbands poorly.

When abuse is addressed from the pulpit, in the pastoral study, in women's Bible-study classes, in Sunday school or in premarital workshops, those who have experienced its pain receive encouragement to come forward. The implicit message rings out: this church, or this pastoral study, is a safe place to recount your experience of being hurt. Giving violence a name and condemning it publicly is one tangible way that congregations and their leaders can respond directly to violence that occurs among women and men in their church family. The Sunday-morning sermon gives the average pastor a valuable opportunity to speak to victims, their families and the perpetrators in an environment where they are not singled out but can choose to respond. Research in various countries has indicated that large numbers of victims, approximately one in five, never disclose their experience of wife abuse until they are asked by an anonymous telephone interviewer to do so; they wait until they are asked.<sup>7</sup>

Once a disclosure of current abuse has been made, it is imperative to take immediate steps to ensure the physical and emotional safety of the victim and her children.<sup>8</sup> Does she have somewhere to go? Does she need transportation? The number-one priority must be to safeguard a woman's life and her children, taking account of the possibility that the abusive man will seek retaliation.<sup>9</sup>

Once their safety is assured, a plethora of practical needs surface: the provision of emergency financial assistance, permanent lodging,<sup>10</sup> childcare, legal counsel, transportation, help for ongoing emotional needs, medical attention, spiritual counseling. Battered women who are Christian often feel that their spirit has been broken, that God does not care about their life, that they are worthless in every way. Among the unique challenges facing conservative Christian women are the enthusiasm among evangelicals for the intact nuclear family<sup>11</sup> and theological doctrines such as forgiveness, separation from the world, glorification of suffering, and instantaneous conversion.<sup>12</sup>

One of the real challenges for evangelical pastors counseling abusive men is to be able to differentiate between their inauthentic pleas for the victim's forgiveness (or God's) and a genuine repentance that makes them accountable for the hurt they have caused, and its consequences, as well as accountable for changed behavior. No helping professional, however well intentioned, can set a time frame for the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. A victim who has heard an abuser say he is sorry many times before will need time and will need to see altered actions to believe that he is serious about living differently. Because evangelical men who are violent often want their pastor to encourage their victim to "forgive and forget," it is imperative that ministers understand the delicate terrain of a manipulative man's ways and a wounded woman's heart. This is not to suggest that evangelical clergy discount the power and potential of change in an abuser's life. But they must understand that many men who abuse their wives, whether they claim the name of Christ or not, claim to want to stop their violence but never do.

The healing journey for victims is long and arduous; many caregivers are required, and ongoing emotional support is needed for the transition from victim to survivor. Many Christian women who are battered would like assistance from both community agencies and their faith fellowship. Healing requires both the language of the spirit and the language of contemporary culture. Help that negates the support of others often thwarts the recovery process and augments pain and despair. The struggle to stop violence and to bring wholeness into the lives of its victims requires that the ideological fences between Christian and secular caregivers have many gates, enabling the smooth transition of hurting men and women to take advantage of the expertise of the physician, the pastor, the lawyer, the shelter worker

and the psychologist. It is shortsighted to expect that one profession alone can respond single-handedly to what years of neglect and misuse have created.

### A Pastor's Story

Robert Wilkins<sup>5</sup> was the pastor of a mid-size church in a bedroom community, sandwiched between a growing industrial city on the one side and farmland on the other. Approaching 40, he had been in the pastorate long enough (13 years) to realize that the demands of the ministry can sometimes be overwhelming and one's level of preparedness woefully inadequate. Rev. Wilkins estimates that perhaps 30% of his pastoral work involves relationship or marital counseling, and he reports that in an average week he would see five different adults seeking his counsel for relationship or marital problems. At least half of those who come for counseling do so for several sessions, and the most frequently cited problems involve the breakdown of communication in the home, the impact of shift work on the family, and how to cope with disruptive children.

Unlike many pastors, Robert Wilkins is willing to refer many of those who seek his counsel to a non-clerical counselor if he feels the situation is beyond his field, or level, of expertise. As a former army chaplain, Pastor Wilkins is comfortable working in a multi-disciplinary team, but he hesitates to refer members of his congregation to secular counselors unless he is well acquainted with them personally. He prefers to make his referrals to other *Christian* counselors, individuals with a strong faith connection. His reluctance is based on his experience: "I find that most secular counselors are not open to the spiritual..." he says.

Robert Wilkins reports that the demand for his marital counsel is increasing, a factor he believes is related to the mobile, transient community in which he lives, and the rampant individualism across the western world. When asked to recount a story of a woman who has sought his assistance in the aftermath of domestic violence, he tells the story of Joan.

Joan came to him fearing for her life and the lives of her two children. Her husband had grown up in an abusive home himself and they had been married for 18 years. Pastor Robert says sadly, "...it had not been a happy relationship, but tolerable, uh, he has pushed and shoved her from time to time." Then he continues the story: "But his scare tactic is to take his hunting rifle out and lay it on the bed and say, 'Okay, I'm gonna shoot myself, I'm gonna shoot myself and somebody else.'"

Joan had endured this kind of abuse for years. In the aftermath of his battery William would be remorseful, buy her presents, and promise to change. But change never came. Robert Wilkins found himself in the awkward situation of counseling Joan to leave the marriage, to find respite and safety for herself and the children. In his words, "it's kind of strange that a pastor would do this, but I, if the situation is abusive like that, I don't counsel the woman to go back, unless he is willing to, to secure some good counseling. But he wasn't."

Joan came to church regularly and her husband came on special occasions, like Christmas and Easter. Robert Wilkins saw the couple in their home, met with Joan separately in his office, and referred them both to separate counselors for more intensive assistance. Joan followed through on the referral suggestion and met intermittently with Pastor Wilkins thereafter to update him on her therapeutic progress. Joan's husband, William, was not willing to seek any help for himself: from his perspective, there was nothing wrong, nothing that needed repair. At the time of our interview with Robert Wilkins, this couple was still living together and Joan would seek respite at her parent's home (approximately 25 miles away) when she was too afraid to be near William.

In summing up his perspective on counselling situations involving abuse, Robert Wilkins explains: "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." Like many pastors, Rev. Wilkins sees the chasm between the high value many Christians place on the intact family and the reality of domestic violence, in cases like Joan and William. As a pastor, he tries to assist in any way he can. Then he sighs, "But I am not a miracle worker, I work for the miracle worker. Unless he intervenes in a dramatic way some relationships dissolve and all I can do is apologize for that, but I can't change it."

From our studies of religious leaders, we have learned how difficult it is for pastors to see their intervention as successful if the marriage ended in divorce. Many clergy feel a pressure to keep families together and marriages intact. In this way, pastoral counsellors frequently find themselves in a very difficult double-bind: they are stalwart supporters of family values, including a reluctance to see any couples' divorce, yet many of the families who seek their counsel need to separate in order to ensure the safety of all. With limited training, and a lack of resources at their disposal, they have not yet learned to identify that it is the relationship that has failed, not their advice.<sup>6</sup>

Translating the rhetoric of "happy family living" into practical help for women, men and couples in crisis is no easy task: it is time consuming and emotionally draining for the pastor, it is often discouraging, there are few simple answers and the rewards can seem to be in short supply. As a result, pastoral counselors sometime feel like they are caught in the cross-fire between the ideology of the family that their denominations and churches hold dear and the nature, severity and persistence of male aggression and abuse.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Story of Shelter Staff Responding to Abused Religious Women**

Karen Mudd<sup>8</sup> is the executive director of a women's shelter in a large metropolitan city. With accommodations for over 30 women and their children, plus outreach services to abused women still in their own homes, she has a very demanding schedule, and sometimes feels the weight of the world on her shoulders. Her staff is often overworked and though she is a very reasonable employer, the needs of the community—especially women and their children who have been violated—are ever present on her mind. She is caught between the demands of the work, her social work background stressing the importance of boundaries with clients, and her knowledge of the value of self-care for herself and those with whom she works. She tries to model the *balanced life*, but like so many professionals, that is easier to talk about than to practice.

On the job, there are always fiscal concerns. Most of the money for the daily operations of the shelter comes from government grants and other “soft” money. Capital costs, when they can be obtained, usually come from a Foundation, where a Board of Directors has placed the issue of violence against women and children as a top priority for funding for a specified period of time (usually one year). So, Karen finds herself always chasing money—for needed repairs (and sometimes improvements) to the facilities, for program enhancements for abused women and their children, for adequate pay and ongoing training opportunities for her staff, and for community dialogue and workshops for other professionals. To be blunt: there is not enough time or enough money to fill all the demands.

In the down-town urban area where the transition house is located, there are a growing number of immigrant families and the diversity of women at the shelter reflects these societal changes. It is important to Karen that the shelter be respectful of all women's cultural and religious experiences, but this is difficult at a practical level. Most of her staff does not have specific knowledge or life experiences that would enable them to talk authoritatively to Muslim or Jewish women, or Mormons, or Wesleyans. In fact, highly religious women of any tradition are difficult for the workers at the shelter. Sometimes, there are individual workers who blame the religious backgrounds of the women for the abuse, but Karen has been diligent in helping her staff see that there are many religious leaders—representing a variety of faith traditions—who speak out against violence in its many and varied forms.

Despite her optimism, Karen knows first-hand that not all religious leaders are willing to work with the shelters. Over the years, she has met many women who have been told to endure the abuse in the name of Christ. Other pastors ask abused women not to go to secular agencies for help when violence threatens peace at home. Still others tell women that they will lose the support of their religious community if they tell an outsider what is happening within the walls of their home. To be sure, some of the blatant disregard for secular shelters has lessened in recent years, but as executive director of a large facility she does not see religious leaders often asking her how they can support the work of rescuing women and children. Rather, it is the women's organizations within those faith communities that are most likely to reach out, volunteer to help, or give financial or in-kind donations. Sometimes, there are women pastors who are particularly open to involvement with Karen and her staff, and some of the shelter staff themselves are members of various faith communities in town. But, in Karen's experience, there is usually one woman who builds a bridge between her church and the local shelter—and then others *come on board*. And sometimes, they are very successful in forging initiatives with the religious leader, or women's groups, or other ministries within that congregation.

As a result of some of these initiatives, Karen has become friends with several women connected to various faith communities around the city. This has opened doors for networking and helped Karen to be able to understand more fully some of the challenges for building bridges between community agencies and congregations. Now, several of those contacts will call Karen to solicit her advice when an abused woman comes to the congregation for help. She also receives invitations to send brochures and other materials on abuse to the faith leaders so that they can disseminate it to their congregants. Karen's contact with many religious leaders has made her far more comfortable relating to those very religious women—of whatever faith tradition—that come to her agency seeking shelter and respite when they flee a violence intimate partner. She would like to have a list of local religious leaders who are willing, and trained, to assist women who would like spiritual counsel in the aftermath of domestic violence. Whether this dream can ever become a reality, only time will tell.

### **Understanding the Transformation Process**

We've considered segments of the transformation story from a variety of perspective: that of the offender, victim/survivor, advocate, and pastor. We've thought about the Scriptures, especially those versus that bring help to victims, challenge to those who sin, comfort to the hurting, or call God's people to bring justice to those who have been wronged. In the closing section of my presentation, I would like to highlight the concepts of grace, justice, accountability and healing and then to think about their interface—or the intersection points—between them.

**Grace**, God's grace, transforms a sinner into a person on a journey towards holy living—in thought, word and deed. Grace makes forgiveness possible. Grace enables our wrong-doings to be placed under the shadow of the cross. Grace ensures that change is possible, that tomorrow can be a different day. Grace means that the old person, made in the likeness of selfishness, can become the new person, fashioned in likeness to Christ. God's grace can—and does—transform. Grace enabled Joseph who had been sold into slavery by his brothers—in contemporary language, we would say he was a victim of human trafficking—to forgive.

**Justice**, the holiness of God demands it and God's people are admonished to administer it. Justice ensures that in God's kingdom there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free. Justice is the penalty for wrongdoing. It is the eye for an eye, or one tooth for another of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the transformed person will offer above and beyond the measure of their sinfulness. Zacheus, for example, was told to repay more than he had taken. The murderer Paul risked his own life for the sake of the churches—caring deeply for believers he had once, no doubt, terrified. Justice (true and authentic justice transformed by God's grace, which, for Christians includes the Biblical concept of repentance) means we are serious about making good on our wrongs. Joseph did not forgive his brothers until he was assured by their words *and* conduct that they were truly sorry and repentant for the harm they had caused him. Premature forgiveness can thwart the healing journey for victims and the road to accountability—and eventual healing—for perpetrators.

**Accountability** can be translated as taking responsibility, or owning the wrong one has done. It also involves putting measures into place to reduce the possibility that one slips back into one's old pattern of behaviour. We speak of accountability groups, or accountability partners, when we want to ensure that our plans for change—or transformation—have a better chance of succeeding. When someone else is checking up on us—a friend, pastor, mentor, or other person empowered to ensure we do what we have promised, or been mandated to do—we are more likely to follow through. When we are watched, we perform better.

And then there is **Healing**. For me, the picture of the healing balm of Gilead—a reference to the Old Testament notion of God's medicine for binding up the broken hearted—drizzling down a hurting body is a powerful image of God's love for us all. For, as Isaiah 61 reminds us, God's spirit is to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, release for prisoners, comfort for those who mourn and a crown of beauty instead of ashes, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. It is like a spiritual recycling centre: we take in our worn-out, broken-down, imprisoned selves and we are made anew. The old is transformed into the new: a vision from the Old Testament of the spiritual transformation made possible by the Lamb of God that takes away sin.

As grace, justice, accountability and healing intersect, we find both challenge and comfort. Inauthentic pleas for forgiveness meet the truth of justice. The downcast eye of the truly repentant is made free—healing replaces guilt and accountability ensures that the path ahead is lined with a great cloud of witnesses.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we all need grace. All believers we know first-hand that it is by grace alone that we are saved—brought in to the family of faith by a second birth. Justice—God's justice—is a frightful thing. Here is where the awe of God meets the nail-scarred hands of Christ. We seek refuge in the shadow of the cross for there we find forgiveness if we repent and believe. Accountability is the life long struggle to have others help us to do what we promise and to live differently—a life that reflects the love of God and compassion towards our neighbour. And finally, and thankfully, there is healing—who amongst us is not in need of the healing balm of Gilead. As accountability and healing co-mingle, we have travelling companions on the road to heaven, friends, mentors and pastors who are cheering us on and helping to pick us up when we fall.

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Appendix A. Religion and Violence e-Learning: The RAVE Project

**Web-based Resource: The RAVE Project** [www.theraveproject.org](http://www.theraveproject.org)

If you have access to the internet, you can call up our web-based series of resources called the Religion and Violence e-Learning Project, or RAVE. Our web address is [www.theraveproject.org](http://www.theraveproject.org); before you begin browsing the RAVE website, make sure that: (1) your computer will temporarily allow “pop-ups;” (2) your sound is on; and (3) you bookmark our site so that you can find it easily at a later point in time.

The RAVE website is designed to help anyone interested in understanding the prevalence or severity of abuse in families of faith or within the broader culture. We offer data on abuse, words from those who have suffered, answer some basic questions about abuse and provide examples of violence around the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Nason-Clark, Nancy and Barbara Fisher-Townsend, *Acting Abusively: Faith, Hope and Charity in the Lives of Violent Men*, book manuscript currently in progress.

<sup>2</sup> Based on clergy interview #396; portions of this story were told in Nason-Clark and Kroeger, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Based on a presentation at a PASCH conference in California in 2006, of which the chapter referenced here is a summary.

<sup>4</sup> Ref to NNC's paper for Drumm

<sup>5</sup> Based on clergy interview #350. Text in italics is quoted verbatim from the interview transcript.

<sup>6</sup> See Nason-Clark, 2009...Drumm article.

<sup>7</sup> Discussed more fully in Nason-Clark, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Karen is a fictitious character that is a composite figure based on years of fieldwork with shelters in various locations in Canada, the US and abroad. Our knowledge of the issues surrounding shelter staff has been supplemented by speaking engagements with, and for, those working within the shelter movement for a period of twenty years. At the beginning of our research program we conducted a small study of telephone interviews with shelter staff in various locations in eastern Canada and an honour's student under my supervision was engaged in research involving boards of directors of shelters.