

# Religion, Domestic Violence and Congregational Life



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**Abstract** The intersection between intimate partner violence and religion offers us an opportunity to explore ways in which religious beliefs and practices make a difference in the life of a woman or man when violence strikes at home. Within this chapter, we consider how faith communities are sometimes part of the problem surrounding abuse and sometimes part of the solution. When abuse is ignored, or minimized by congregational leadership, there is no attempt to be part of the journey towards healing and wholeness for a victim, or accountability and change for an offender. When abuse is condemned and its patterns understood by congregational leadership, there are practical, emotional, and spiritual resources available to assist all family members who are impacted by it. The development of faith-specific resources is still in its early days as are collaborative community efforts that include religious communities. As the chapter argues, intimate partner violence will never be eradicated until we offer best practices to those who suffer, including those who are religious, and challenge the structures of our society that privilege some people more than others. The chapter concludes with a challenge: we all have a role to play in making relationships and our communities a safe place for everyone!

**Keywords** Domestic violence · Intimate partner violence · Religious leaders · Victims · Abuse · Faith-specific resources · Christians · Safety · Abusers

## 1 Introduction

Intimate partner violence is always an ugly subject. It affects large numbers of women, though some men too are victims. It happens in all kinds of families—rich and poor, educated and uneducated, and in the broad spectrum of diversities represented by sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, culture, and religion. The emotional scars of intimate partner violence last a long time. Children within the family do

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not escape unscathed: many learn to reproduce the patterns they observed, or experienced, in their childhood home and many too battle the impact of their families long after they have attained adulthood themselves. While abusive behaviour is certainly learned, it thrives most ferociously when it is misunderstood or minimized. Violence between intimates is a problem that impacts our society at so many levels and, as such, requires a coordinated community response in order that it might be reduced, and one day, eliminated.

In this chapter, we explore the interface between religion and intimate partner violence. We consider some of the ways that faith communities are part of the problem—augmenting, or ignoring, the abuse that abounds in their midst. And we focus, more particularly, on ways that faith communities are part of the solution—offering practical and emotional resources to assist victims as they heal and calling abusers to accountability and change.

Within our broader culture in Canada, but evidenced in other countries too, there is a prevailing view that religion has little to offer to the discourse on abuse, or violence between intimates. Such a position is misguided at best, and dangerous at worst, especially for religious victims, as it separates them from one of the few resources that might be able to be harnessed in the aftermath of abusive, controlling, or violent actions at home.

As the following story illustrates, there are many nuances to the way that religion and abuse co-mingle in the life of a victim, or a perpetrator, or their families. In some ways, the story of an explicitly religious woman who has been abused is similar to that of other women, but there are many unique features too, including how the abuse is understood and options in its aftermath. These are themes we will develop later in the chapter.

## 2 Mary's Story

After Mary waved good-bye to Sue and Pat, she unlocked her car door and slid into the driver's seat. She placed her purse, Bible, and cell phone on the console beside her and, as she did, she could feel her level of anxiety begin to increase. Why did she always feel this way after she got into the car on Tuesday morning at the completion of the Women's Bible Study? What was it about this small gathering of women that made her feel so loved while they were together and so very empty when the group disbanded? Tears began to form in her eyes and then stream down her cheeks. She wiped them away and quickly pressed the button to start her car. She did not want to draw attention to herself or risk the possibility that Brenda, always the last to leave, would come and see why she was still in the church parking lot.

As the car began to accelerate down the highway, so too did her tears. She took the first exit, in hopes that the "drive-thru coffee shop" with its expansive parking lot would be a place where she could grab a cup of java and sit alone in the car with her thoughts and her fears. Before she could sit and sip, she texted Angie, the neighbour who was minding her children, to say that she had a couple of things to do

before she came home and asked if that was okay with her. She offered to bring back some fresh muffins from the bakery as a treat.

Snapshots of her life began to come to mind—the first night that Greg asked her out; the party where she introduced Greg to her friends; the first time they went to church together; his late night calls only to say he was missing her by his side; Greg’s proposal; her beautiful wedding dress. These were pleasant pictures, and many brought a smile to her face as she continued to wipe the tears from her eyes. And then, like a roar of thunder, came the unwanted, but equally true to her life images: the first time he called her a slut; that Saturday morning when he pushed her with great force into the kitchen cupboards; the Sunday night when he back-handed her as they drove home from Jen’s after-church snack. “*Imagine, Greg accusing me of flirting with the husbands of my friends!?*”, she said aloud, although she was the only one in the car to hear her own voice.

In many ways, these snapshots were a vivid portrayal of the roller coaster ride of her life with Greg: the times that were ever so good, and the times that she felt like she was being swallowed up with the pain, the hurt, and the fear of what would happen next.

As she sipped coffee, alone in her car, she realized that it had been some time since she had allowed herself to prepare this kind of inventory of her relationship with Greg. Almost every time that she had been overcome with emotion about their relationship, or her failure to make Greg happy, she had focussed on what *she* could do to make things better. Like the time she went to see Krista, the leader of the Women’s Bible Study. She told her that she wanted to be a better wife and mother: wanted to receive more practical help from her religious devotions; wanted to have more patience with the children; wanted to satisfy—no, more than satisfy—Greg’s wants and needs. She neglected to disclose to Krista that she was frightened of Greg’s anger, of the bruises he had put on her body, or the growing fear he had placed in her heart. Or, the time, that she and Greg together met with the pastor—oh, the tragedy of that time!

She drained the coffee cup and decided that, just this once, as a total indulgence, she would get another cup of coffee and sit for a few more minutes in the parking lot. For some reason, strange as it was, all this thinking was making her feel a little bit better, a little bit like perhaps she could take control of her own life—that she had some options.

Even though the young man at the window of the coffee shop drive-thru gave her an odd look, she picked up her order, this time the coffee being accompanied by a muffin. Then she steered the car to a back corner of the lot and backed into a parking spot, away from the view of most of the patrons. At this point, once she took a few bites of the muffin and a few sips of the brew, she let her mind return to the “visit with the pastor.”

Mary tried to remember the date—best to get things straight in her mind, she thought to herself. It was spring, early spring, and the forsythia in her garden was just blooming. She remembered seeing it as she opened the door of Greg’s truck and hopped into the seat beside him. Neither of them spoke as they drove to the church. Going to see the pastor was a mediated settlement for Greg: Mary had threatened to

arrange to see a therapist or go home to spend some time with her parents, some 300 miles away, if Greg didn't agree to seek help for their ailing marriage. He certainly was not in favour of some "feminist" messing around with his wife's head, and he didn't like the idea that Mary's parents might "pry out of her," things that he felt should be kept private, "between the sheets," so to speak.

As they drove, Greg was thinking of all the things he had done *for* Mary over the years. He wanted to be sure that he could remember to drop into the conversation some of these stories as they spoke with Reverend Anthony Steel. Yes, Pastor Tony would love these. Greg knew that he needed to show what a caring, thoughtful husband he was, or else the "sharing" with the pastor could go badly, especially for the future of their marriage. He decided that he would take control of the interview, make it sound like he wanted to get help, and throw in a few Bible passages—something that he knew always impressed the pastor. He would never admit that it made him agitated when Mary went to services twice on Sunday, or that she insisted they give generously to the church, or that she wanted the children to remember to pray before they ate their meals. No, he would keep these frustrations to himself and instead focus on how, after supper, Mary got easily annoyed with the children when they did not want to go to bed, often did not have the supper ready for him when he got home from work later than her, or wanted to keep a part of her salary cheque "to herself."

As they drove, Mary was thinking of all the things *she* had done wrong over the years. She should not have allowed Greg to sleep with her before they were married, should have listened to her parents and have insisted on a longer engagement period, should have seen some of the signs of Greg's controlling behaviour, should have listened more carefully to what *he* wanted to do with *their* money, and should have sought help immediately the first time he hit her. She knew that she nagged him a bit about their church involvement, and she knew she nagged him a lot about helping with the children. But was this wrong? Surely it was her duty as a Christian wife and mother to ensure that they lived at home what was preached on Sunday. In fact, she had read in the Bible just this past week that sometimes we are called to suffer, that certain life experiences can be *our cross to bear*. Mary thought about that short devotional book for women: the one that she consulted almost every day. It said that Jesus was a suffering servant, and that there were times that as his followers we will be mistreated and have to suffer too! It also said that women should long to have a *servant's heart*—though she was not exactly sure what this meant. When she asked Greg, later in bed, he said that it was doing as your husband asked, and *not complaining*. She thought this was very self-serving of him to see it this way, though she kept her thoughts to herself.

Before long, Mary and Greg were sitting in two comfy chairs inside the pastor's study, a lovely office where the late afternoon sun was streaming in through the long, slender windows. Tony greeted them at the door, after having been called by the church receptionist to announce their arrival. Tony was a forty-something people-person who had served this growing congregation for almost 10 years. He was a trim man, who liked to keep fit, and was especially good at developing relationships with young families. He enjoyed his own family a great deal and was very

enthusiastic about helping young people find “the right person” and to maximize living a “full life” in the family context.

As he had planned, Greg explained to Pastor Tony why he and Mary had come to seek help. He narrated their story in a way that so surprised Mary that she was almost unable to speak when the pastor turned to hear what she had to say. She admitted to some nagging. She admitted to some unhappiness. And she promised to do better. Greg admitted to nothing at all. He promised to be forgiving of Mary, just as the Scriptures taught. “Seventy-times-seven, isn’t it, pastor?” he said at one point. Mary felt queasy and thought that she might throw up.

Mary did not disclose about the abuse. Mary did not say she was frightened of Greg and his anger. Mary did not tell Pastor T. that Greg took control of all of their spending, even refusing her a portion of her own pay cheque to “spend as she wished” on additional things for the children, or on lunches out with her friends, or on beauty treatments—things they could well afford.

At one point during the interview with Rev. Steel she sat up straight, took a deep breath, and was about to challenge one of Greg’s accounts of their family life, but he threw her a look that so frightened her, that she exhaled, slumped back into her seat, and decided it was too risky to speak the truth.

Pastor Tony summed up their time together by suggesting that Mary focus on being thankful for all that Greg does for her, and the children, and that Greg continue with his forgiving spirit. “God will help to ease her out of her unhappiness,” he said to Greg, with a pat on the back. Then he turned to them both and asked whether Greg would like to be more involved in helping with the Boy’s Program on Saturday mornings.

In his prayer for them, before they left his office, Pastor Tony recited the verse “Unto whom much is given, much will be required,” as a way to motivate Greg to take on an additional church responsibilities and to shake Mary out of her sadness—by reminding her of all their material blessings.

As they walked past the receptionist, she noticed that Mary looked downcast and Greg elated. “Great meeting,” he said loudly to Mary, “I should have insisted on this earlier.”

Her second coffee cup drained, Mary got out of the car and took both disposable cups and walked over to the large garbage can near the coffee shop. As she threw them in the trash, she felt a renewed sense that she needed to be making some plans for her future, and for her children. No longer was she going to wait for Greg to change, she was going to take steps to ensure that there would be peace and safety in her home. It was going to be up to her—that is what her parents told her the day they dropped her off at college and on the way to her wedding, as her mother kissed her for the last time as a single woman, and whispered: *With God’s help, we will always be there for you. Please never forget how much we love you!*

Mary almost ran back to the car, buoyed by the contrast between her husband’s abuse and her parent’s offer of support. Why had she not realized this before? Mary told herself that each day for the next week, she would take at least one hour and focus on what her next steps might be. As an emergency room nurse, she worked a few days each week and then had a few days off. Maybe she could even ask Jill to

look after the children for a few hours on one of her days off and use that opportunity to both call her parents and make a further appointment to see Pastor Tony. She dashed in to the bakery to pick up the treats for Jill and for her own family, and then went straight home to call the church for an appointment.

As we have learned from our ongoing program of research, what happens next depends in large measure on the pastor and their level of training and experience relating directly to abuse in the family. Will Reverend Steel be part of the problem, or part of the solution? Will he help or hinder Mary's journey towards healing and wholeness? Will he be prepared to hold Greg accountable for his actions? In essence, Mary will learn whether or not her church and the pastor's study are safe places for her to disclose that she is a victim of intimate partner abuse.

### 3 Understanding the Issues

Mary's story offers us a glimpse into some of the challenges faced by devoted Christian women when they are abused by their husbands. Mary's faith and her faith community can be harnessed as a resource at her point of deep personal need. But sometimes they become an obstacle when a pastor underestimates a woman's need for practical help, or the real danger to her physical or emotional health. Pastors often exaggerate the remorse of the abuser, or his ability or desire to change his way of thinking or behaving. Sometimes religious leaders overestimate the options of an abused wife and by so doing add to her guilt and resolve that she must try harder. Often ministers or other spiritual leaders do not know what to say or what to do when an abused woman of faith comes to them for help. Unaware of the dynamics of abuse and the community resources to assist, they attempt, but do not succeed, in helping her to take action that would increase her safety and longer term psychological well-being.

From our research program we have learned that less than 10% of Christian pastors report that they are well equipped to respond to the needs of abuse victims who seek their help (Nason-Clark 1997) and seminary students, as well, report a lack of preparedness for ministry in this area (McMullin and Nason-Clark 2011). As a result, it is not surprising that they underestimate the prevalence and severity of abuse and often fail to refer the women who seek their assistance to other experts in the community. In fact, referral rates are lowest amongst those pastors with the least knowledge of abuse—the very cases where a referral to an expert is so badly needed (Kroeger and Nason-Clark 2010). While there is no evidence from our research that pastors ignore the violence that is reported to them by women victims, they are often unaware of the impact it has on children, or the intergenerational patterns of abusive behaviour, or the temporary nature of remorse in the life of a violent man. Their lack of understanding places women and their children at risk.

Many religious women believe that if their abusive husbands receive help that they can, and will, change. This puts a lot of pressure on the pastoral counsellor or spiritual leader. Clergy too are often very optimistic that change will occur—even in

the face of years of experience observing limited change in the lives of those abusive men (or women) they have attempted to help. Wise counsel from a religious leader must include an understanding that God's provision for victims of abuse is not limited to altered behaviour in the one who is causing their pain (Nason-Clark and Kroeger 2004).

One of the findings to emerge from our research is that many ministers are reluctant, unwilling, or perhaps even unable, to provide explicitly spiritual help to victims who come to them for help. We find this surprising, since for many women, the reason they go first to their religious leader is that they want help with the spiritual dimensions of their problem. Often women feel abandoned by God at their point of need, feel like they must keep on forgiving their abusive partner, or believe that divorce is never an option. Part of the counsel they need is related to their spiritual life and spiritual angst. This is something that normally cannot be offered at a community-based agency, from a worker who may or may not be familiar with their faith tradition.

We have learned that churches and religious leaders who are proactive when it comes to abuse encourage disclosures amongst those who attend their churches and assist victims and abusers alike to seek both help from a religious professional and as well as help from professionals based in the community. Not only do pastors have an important role to play in offering support and empowerment to Christian women who are abused, but they are vital in any community-based coordinated response (where workers from a variety of different agencies, including the police and the justice system, work together in an effort to coordinate their intervention and thereby increase its effectiveness) to work with those who act abusively. Challenging an abusive religious man, using the words of his faith tradition, is powerful. In so doing the religious leader helps to bring justice, accountability, and change.

### ***3.1 Something to Think About and Something to Do***

You have just read the story of Mary. Now I want you to picture in your mind how she might have felt as she approached the church building and the pastor's office after she made a phone call to see him alone.

If you have never attended a Christian church, or at least not for a long time, it would be a good idea to attend a service, or even two, just to remind yourself what happens there. There you will observe that a wide variety of people meet together to worship, sing, learn, and socialize.

When you do so, ask yourself this question: *Do I think that it would be safe for Mary to approach this pastor, in this church, with her story of intimate partner violence?* Are there any clues from the service that would either lead me to believe that this congregation would be a safe place to disclose violence or that this would be a place where her pain and her despair would be minimized or ignored?

Throughout this book, you are being presented with the richness of images, texts, and practices that come under the umbrella of *religious diversity*. Later in this chapter, you will be presented with the variety of behaviors that are included in any definition of abuse, or intimate partner violence. But, for the moment, I want you to reflect on the point about religious diversity and think about Mary's story from the perspective of a woman linked to a faith tradition other than conservative Christianity. To help you to do this, consult a variety of websites that focus on faith traditions other than Christianity. Google several shelters for battered women that are specifically for aboriginal women, or Muslim women, or Jewish women and read what is presented about these services online. You can also consult websites that are specifically designed to highlight a particular faith tradition and see if you can locate any information there that talks about intimate partner violence. And you can call a local shelter and ask if they have any information on hand about resources available for women of particular faith traditions. At this point, you should be ready to answer a few questions.

### 3.2 *Religious Diversity and Mary's Story*

1. In what ways do you think that Mary's story would unfold differently if Mary were practising a faith other than evangelical Christianity? What if she were Jewish? Or Muslim? Or Mormon? Choose two faith traditions to explore your answer. Listening to some of the scholars talk about their research on the Religion and Diversity Project website <<http://religionanddiversity.ca/en/projects-and-tools/projects/linking-classrooms/#resources>> might give you some ideas about the various world religions.
2. How might the story unfold differently if Mary had grown up as a Catholic, but drifted away from regular contact with her parish? Here it is important that you consider any additional challenges that a woman might have if she is no longer connected in a regular way with her faith community but its hold on her heart is still strong. To assist you with this, look at the photo essay of an older woman standing outside her church and looking in that has been placed on the Religion and Diversity Project website <<http://religionanddiversity.ca/en/projects-and-tools/projects/linking-classrooms/photo-essays/there-not-here/>>.



## 4 Intimate Partner Violence: An Introduction to Key Concepts and Statistical Data

Around the globe, there is ample evidence of the prevalence and severity of violence against women and the girl child. The best way to become acquainted with the frequency of intimate partner violence is to consider the statistics that have been collected. At this point I invite you to go to the RAVE website, a website I developed together with other colleagues, based upon the results of our various research projects [www.theraveproject.org](http://www.theraveproject.org).

For the remainder of this chapter, I will be asking you to consult regularly with the content that is presented there. Sometimes, you will be asked to read some text, other times to consider the visual representation of a concept, and sometimes to listen to an audio or watch a video clip.

### 4.1 *How Common Is Violence Against Women?*

Several years ago, a colleague and I worked with a number of student research assistants to compile a snapshot of the prevalence and severity of woman abuse around the world (Kroeger and Nason-Clark 2010). The amount of data collected in various countries leads to one overwhelming conclusion: violence against women is pervasive. And, most often, that violence is perpetrated by someone with whom women have shared intimacy and a common residence (United Nations 2013).

Working with other colleagues and student research assistants, that information has been updated and presented in a way that you can access now. So, to address the question we have posed at the beginning of this section, go to the Violence Around the World section on the RAVE website and click on a variety of different countries. When you click on the red markers, you will be taken to an in-depth look at data that has been collected by an organization like the World Bank, or the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), or the statistics department of the government of individual countries.

On our RAVE website, you will learn first-hand of the staggering rates of violence. Sometimes students want to know why there is such variations in the data that is presented from, and within, different countries. The answer to this question is that: well, it depends. Sometimes it depends on how the data were collected. Sometimes it depends on the precise way that the questions were composed, or asked. Sometimes it depends on how expansive the projects were, or the funding or time constraints under which the researchers were working. But, irrespective of these differences—and they are important—the conclusion is undeniable: violence against women is far too common, everywhere. Table 1 provides a snapshot of some of the data related to our country, Canada.

In their excellent and highly informative book, *Violence Against Women in Canada: Research and Policy Perspectives* (2011), Holly Johnson and Myrna Dawson document that violence against female partners is the most common form

**Table 1** Fast facts concerning intimate partner violence in Canada

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According to police-reported data, almost 88,000 people in Canada were victims of family violence in 2013 (Statistics Canada 2013);

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Listed amongst the summary statements from the 2014 General Social Survey (GSS), the most commonly-reported type of spousal violence was being pushed, grabbed, shoved or slapped (35%), followed by sexually assaulted, beaten, choked, or threatened with a gun or a knife (25%), and kicked, hit, or hit with something (25%); women victims reported the most severe types of spousal violence;

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Almost one in three (31%) victims of spousal violence reported physical injuries as a result of the abuse (Statistics Canada 2014);

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According to the 2014 GSS, in the majority of cases of spouse violence, the police were never called or informed of the abuse (70%);

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Canadian Aboriginal women are two times more likely to be a victim of spousal violence than are non-Aboriginal women (Statistics Canada 2014);

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The highest one year rates of intimate partner abuse are reported by women between the age band of fifteen and twenty-four (Statistics Canada 2005);

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The first transition houses in Canada opened in 1973—they were located in Vancouver, Calgary and Saskatoon (Tutty 2006);

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By 2008, there were over 500 shelters for battered women in Canada, located in every region of the country (Johnson and Dawson 2011).

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of family violence in our country. Like other researchers have found, Johnson and Dawson argue that women victims themselves often perceive *emotional abuse* to be more devastating than other forms of violence, including *physical abuse*. In my own research program, that has been ongoing for over twenty-five years, I have observed that women often claim that the persistent emotional put-downs and verbal abuse, like name calling, takes a greater toll on their mental health and well-being than other forms of abuse (Nason-Clark 1997; Nason-Clark and Kroeger 2004).

In Canada, and indeed around the world, we are becoming more aware of the various forms of violence against women and of the devastating consequences intimate partner violence brings to the lives of its victims (Asay et al. 2014; Black et al. 2010, 2011). While physical abuse refers to behaviours such as punching, grabbing, hitting, choking, or striking with an object, *financial abuse* refers to withholding access to money, or stealing resources that do not belong to you. *Spiritual abuse* includes denying, or limiting, the access of someone to their church or house of worship, or its faith leader.

There are many intersecting factors that create special vulnerabilities for designated groups of women when it comes to the issue of abuse, such as the elderly, the disabled, new immigrants, racialized minorities, the poor, and women connected to LBGQTQ2SA communities. In more recent years, growing attention has been directed to the multiple ways that some groups of abused women are especially disadvantaged—both in terms of the experience of abuse and the strategies and resources available in its aftermath (cf. Crenshaw, 1994; Statistics Canada 2009; Nason-Clark et al. 2018).

## 4.2 *How Can I Understand the Reason Why Violence Is So Common?*

Violence against women happens because, as of yet, we do not have sufficient will or sufficient resources to stop it. You might be asking yourself, at this point, some very important questions, like:

- Why do men hurt the women that they claim to love?
- How are children impacted when violence hits home?
- What resources are available to women when violence occurs?
- What can be done to stop this awful behaviour?

I would invite you to again visit the RAVE website and click on the tab: FAQs—Frequently Asked Questions.

We developed the answers to these questions with content experts from Canada and the United States representing criminal justice, therapeutic, advocacy, and religious perspectives. As you read the variety of responses to each question, ask yourself to consider the many factors involved in understanding the *why*, *how*, *where*, and *when* of abuse.

Over the last forty years, there has been a growing interest in trying to understand the subject of abuse (Dobash et al. 2000). Initially conceptualized as the very private problem of one man treating one woman poorly within a marriage, or other intimate relationships, the social problem of violence against women is now understood to be rooted in the power imbalances between men and women in the broader culture as well as the social construction of masculinity and femininity. Feminists were central in highlighting early the need to make the personal issue of woman abuse a public issue and to work to provide both shelter and respite for victims (Timmins 1995).

While abuse is anything but new, talking about it in public settings is often not welcomed. Many of our great-grandmothers, and the women who have gone on before them, considered rough treatment at the hands of an intimate partner to be simply *life* and they believed that they had promised as part of their marital vows to stick it out in the good times as well as those times that brought pain and suffering.

Control is a key concept in understanding violent or abusive acts perpetrated by an intimate partner. While, in the last decade, there has been some suggestion of gender symmetry in abusive acts between partners, Walter DeKeseredy in his 2011 book, *Violence Against Women: Myths, Facts, Controversies*, argues that the notion of gender symmetry is erroneous, adding another level to the pain and suffering of woman abuse victims. Further, he claims that it has become a political excuse used by governments to deny, or reduce, funding to services for abused women. In defense of his position in opposition to gender symmetry, he cites data that document: (1) almost all requests for police assistance in terms of abuse are from, or in support of, women victims; (2) women are more likely to be injured in domestic violence cases than are men, and their injuries are more severe; (3) more medical

assistance is sought by women than men in a hospital setting after domestic violence occurs; and (4) few men seek emergency shelter in the aftermath of abuse.

If you have never experienced abuse yourself, or known a close friend or family member who is suffering in this way, it might be difficult to understand why a woman would choose to keep silent what is happening behind closed doors. Almost all women who are victims of abuse feel alone, betrayed, and filled with fear (Martin 1981). Frequently they blame themselves for the abuse, believing if they had been a better wife, or mother, or girlfriend, that the abuse would have never taken place. They tend to minimize both the fear and the hurt they have experienced. And often they take so much energy trying to keep the abuse a secret that there is little energy left over for thinking through their next steps in the search for safety and a life free of the abuse. Safety, though, must always be the first priority in responding to any victim of intimate partner violence. Asking a woman directly whether or not it is safe for her to return back home after she has sought help, or disclosed violence, is extremely important.

### 4.3 Understanding Women's Narrative of Abuse

Over the years, through many different research projects, we have attempted to understand how women narrate their own story of being a victim, and then a survivor, of intimate partner violence. As you will have seen already, on our RAVE website, we have a variety of strategies to communicate the results of our research projects, and the implications of our findings. But, perhaps our most successful venture over the years in doing this has been the preparation of *The Stained Glass Story of Abuse*.

Return to the RAVE website and spend a few minutes looking at the various window panes that tell the story of abuse, as told to us by the women who experienced that abuse and those who walked alongside them, as friends, as advocates, or as religious leaders (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** The stained glass story of Abuse

What do you see when you look at this series of windows? What strikes you as the most important messages that are being conveyed by this visual representation of the lives of women who have been impacted by intimate partner violence? Perhaps, you are viewing the panes of glass through your own experience as a survivor. Perhaps, you are thinking of a loved one, or maybe a friend, as you look at the stained glass. Later in the chapter, we will be thinking about those who act abusively, but at this point, we want you to direct your attention to the way a victim tells her story.

Interestingly, almost all women begin their story when the intimate relationship was happy, peaceful, and loving. And it is to that time in the relationship that they long to return. But, as the second pane of glass reveals, the relationship never looks the same after violence strikes. Everything is transformed—the colours, the patterns, and the connections. There is no rewinding the tape as if the abuse could be erased from view. This does not mean that families cannot be reunited, or that separation always occurs. But it does mean that after violence there is a slow, and often painful, process of rebuilding until gradual renewal begins to occur. Abused women are very aware of those who have been helpful in their lives as they assembled the various jagged pieces—fragments from their past—and began a process of reshaping and reconfiguring them into a new life. Some of those who walked alongside them were friends and family, but sometimes it was a pastor, a woman's Bible Study leader, or an elder in the congregation who helped them to see that deep within them was courage, hope, talent, and endless possibilities. We all need help sometimes recognizing that we have strength and resiliency in the face of obstacles, but this is even more pronounced in the life of someone who has been told over and over that they can do nothing right.

#### **4.4 Understanding Men's Narratives of Acting Abusively**

In our 2015 book, *Men Who Batter*, Barbara Fisher-Townsend and I recount how men who have acted abusively tell their own story, a journey that often begins in childhood, ripens in their teenage years, and takes them down paths they were hoping to never travel. The men's accounts of their lives are told within a broader framework of the agency where they attended groups, and the regional coordinated community response to domestic violence, which includes the criminal justice workers (e.g., probation, parole, judges) and those who staff shelters and work in advocacy. Interwoven with this rich and colourful portrayal of the lives of the men, we interject reality checks from their own case files and those professionals who have worked within them. Women who have been victimized in intimate personal relationships hold out great hope that if their abusers are held accountable, brought to justice, and receive intervention, that peace and safety will be restored to their lives and to their homes. This is one of the many reasons we believe it is so important to understand how men themselves think about the abuse that they mete out on someone they claim to love.

Control is a central feature of abuse (Dobash and Dobash 1979; DeKeseredy 2011). Many men want to control every aspect of what happens in the life that they share with an intimate partner. Often they claim a sense of *entitlement*—to services, like house work, and to activities, like sex. When they believe that they are not receiving what they are entitled to, they use unkind words, demeaning gestures, and their fists to exert power and control over their partners (Bancroft 2002; Panchanadeswaran et al. 2010). Sometimes, an action that might appear loving, like texting a lot every day and every evening, can become a source of power and control in a dating relationship.

Theorists and domestic violence activists all agree that violence against women is multi-faceted, the result of a merger of interconnected factors including childhood experiences and present life circumstances. In an excellent article, Heise (1998) offers a model of explanation employing four concentric circles: personal history, microsystem factors, exosystem factors, and macrosystem factors. Personal history, as you might suspect, refers to witnessing or experiencing abuse in your childhood home. Microsystem factors refer to characteristics of your family of origin, including substance abuse, while poverty, or having close friends in trouble with the law are examples of the influence of the exosystem. Finally, the macrosystem refers to the influence of rigid gender roles, the social construction of masculinity, and the willingness to accept violence. Taken together, these concentric circles help us to begin to understand how a man might see violence as a way to get what he wants and believes he deserves.

In a similar fashion to the construction of *The Stained Glass Story of Abuse* as a way to share women's narratives of victimization and survivorship, we have collaborated again with stained glass artists to produce a window that highlights the stories of men who act abusively. You can view the window on the RAVE website, and it has been reproduced below so that you can look carefully at it even as you read the text to explain its various features (Fig. 2).

What do you see when you consider the tree as a representation of the life of a man who acts abusively with his intimate partner? Do you see that the tree is blown in one direction, responding to its environment, including the prevailing wind? Do you see the sun and the moon, reminding us that abuse occurs around the clock, when the sun is up and when we only see the moon? What do the blackened roots reveal? Or the prominent red line that snakes up and encircles the tree? Or the emerging streaks of red on the tender leaves? (If you are unable to see the colours displayed here, I invite you to go to the RAVE website at <[www.theraveproject.org](http://www.theraveproject.org)>).

This visual representation of the lives of men who batter helps us to understand that many men are repeating as adults what they experienced as children, watching their fathers harm their mothers, or as the victim of cruel aggression themselves (Nason-Clark and Fisher-Townsend 2015). Of course, not all men who experienced abuse in their childhood home repeat those acts of violence when they are adults, and some men who have been violent change their abusive ways and commit violent acts no longer. Many men also suffer from low self-esteem or struggle with addic-



**Fig. 2** Stained glass portrait of men who batter

tions to alcohol or other substances (Gondolf 2002). Substance abuse and violence often co-mingle and it is very important that both of these significant problems are addressed in complementary, but not the same, intervention programs.

Intervention programs for men who batter are often part of a coordinated community response to domestic violence. Abusive men who have been processed by the criminal justice system and found to be guilty of domestic violence are sometimes mandated by a judge to attend such a group, while others go voluntarily, either at the request of their partner, or on their own. Irrespective of how they get there, men who attend batterer intervention programs are encouraged to develop *empathy* for the victim of their aggression, to take *responsibility* for their violent, abusive behaviour, and become *accountable* to others to live life differently than they have in the past, free from abuse. Sometimes religious leaders become part of a man's accountability structures.

#### 4.5 *Understanding the Impact of Religion in the Lives of the Abused and the Abusers*

In our book, *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence: Understanding the Challenges and Proposing Solutions* (2018), my colleagues and I have explored the unique vulnerabilities facing abused *religious* women. When violence strikes the homes of deeply religious women, they are more likely to believe that their partners, can, and will, change. Many are reluctant to seek outside sources for help, believing that in some way that are compromising their faith or faith community in doing so. Many deeply religious women stay in a violent home, fearing that to leave, temporarily or forever, would be breaking a promise made to God during their marriage vows. Frequently, women of faith report disappointment, though, after they have sought the help of their religious leader—often because that leader does not really hear their cry for help or does not know what to suggest.

Unfortunately, many religious leaders are not at all well-equipped to respond with compassion and best practices to those who seek their help—abuser and abused alike. It is not that they are quick to ignore or minimize the suffering, but that they are reluctant to refer men and women to community-based agencies, or outside professionals that they neither know nor trust. As a result, sometimes abusers are able to manipulate their religious leader and, in so doing, compromise the safety and well-being of the entire family unit.

However, it is important to highlight that religious leaders and congregations can be part of the solution to domestic violence in families of faith. In fact, our research has revealed that they can be a very important part of the journey of a woman victim towards safety, security, and wellness for herself and for her children. Correspondingly, we have learned that when religious leaders call men to accountability and justice, their impact for good on the lives of abusive men and their families is profound.

Nevertheless, many workers in community-based agencies are skeptical of the added value of a religious leader, or a faith-based perspective, around the collaborative community table. In part, this is a reflection of prior negative experiences in working with religious people, or religious leaders. Shelter workers often hear abused women themselves report disappointment in the lack of support offered to them by a church or other house of worship. Notwithstanding these important impediments to collaborative efforts, when religious leaders are trained in the dynamics of abuse and when community-based workers understand the importance of faith to a highly religious person, the possibilities of working together can become a reality.

It is important to be clear: religious beliefs and practices can be harnessed by women and by men at their point of deepest need, including the experience of intimate partner violence. But whether those beliefs and practices contribute to the problem that is faced or help to overcome it will in large measure depend on how the experience of violence and the experience of their religion is framed by those from whom they seek help, religious and secular alike. If a woman's fear or her suffering is not well understood by a religious leader, she may be encouraged to return



to an abusive home where her safety and health cannot be assured. If her fear that she will be abandoned by God and her faith community should she seek shelter for herself and her children in a transition house is not taken seriously by a worker there, she may go right back into the arms of the religious man who is abusive to her.

So, what are some practical things that a faith community can do to raise awareness about abuse and to make it a safe place for a woman to disclose that she is a victim of intimate partner violence? On our website, you will find a large number of suggestions, but some of my personal favourites include:

- Placing brochures in the stalls of the church washroom where it is safe to read the contents without anyone else seeing you;
- Ensuring that abuse is discussed when couples come for pre-marital counselling (months before the wedding takes place);
- Men offering their trucks to the local shelter on a Saturday for women who are moving into their first apartment after seeking refuge there;
- Taking school supplies to the local transition house for any children who are residing there.

## 5 Making Connections

At this point it is important to make some connections between what you are learning in this chapter and other chapters in this text and your broader educational experience. In an online course entitled Religion and Family Violence that Catherine Holtmann and I teach at the University of New Brunswick, we ask students to think through the implications of what they have read and seen (in the articles and the PowerPoint slides) in each of the 12 modules of the course. For many students this is a difficult undertaking—making connections between the material and what difference it makes, in their own lives, or within the society of which we are a part.

I would like to ask you at this point to make three sets of connections, one at the personal level, one at the level of your social network, and one at the broader community level, but we will start by thinking broadly first and then narrowing our response inward.

1. For the *community level connection*, I would like for you to visit Calgary's HomeFront website <<http://homefrontcalgary.com/main/>>. Read about their various initiatives and the data they have amassed to document their effectiveness (HomeFront Calgary, 2011). Look at some of their infomercials and consider the vast array of professionals with whom they collaborate. HomeFront is a coordinating body for over 50 community agencies, government departments, health care services, and legal advisers all working together to end abuse and to respond to women, men, and children impacted by it. You can read about their Specialized Domestic Violence Court, the Domestic Conflict Response Team, the High Risk Management Initiative, and Early Intervention and Outreach. This is a stellar example of one city in Canada deciding that it will take domestic violence seriously and work together in various sectors of government and non-

profits agencies to make a significant difference in the lives of abusers and the abused. They even work together with faith communities (Sevcik et al. 2015).

2. For your *social network connection* I would like you to think about the various songs you hear when you are out for an evening, the movies that you have watched recently, and the books or people that you discuss when you are hanging out with your friends. What would happen if you were to comment on the lyrics of a rap song? Or the violence amidst a sexual assault on the screen? Or share your worry about a friend that you thought was being stalked by a former partner? Think about whether or not it is safe, or comfortable, or commonplace for you to mention these kinds of observations to your friends. What does thinking about these matters say to you and about those with whom you share friendship?
3. For your *personal connection* I would like to ask you to think about the fairy tale, *Beauty and the Beast*, or *Cinderella*, or *The Little Mermaid*. If you have never been exposed to any of these fairy tales, you could probably read the storyline online, or browse a children's section of the library, or view the Disney version on the screen. What are some of the messages that these tales give to girls? To boys? What do they say about intimate relationships? In the case of *Beauty and the Beast*, what do they say about changing violent behaviour? And who is responsible for that change? If you have ever read the line, *And they lived happily ever after*, you will know only too well that our culture makes it very difficult for women (or men) to leave abusive relationships, temporarily, or forever.

The purpose of these three sets of connections is to help you to see that there are so many ways that we can begin to think about, and act upon, the subject of intimate partner violence. It is all around us, but often, we don't even see it. Now I am going to ask you to think about some critical questions that relate to the core of this chapter: religion and abuse.

## 6 Current Challenges and Future Opportunities/ Possibilities

In this chapter we have considered the intersection between intimate partner violence and religion. While there is little doubt that all religions need to respond to abuse in their own communities, the development of faith-specific resources is still in its early days. That brings both challenges and opportunities to the fore. There is ample room for the development of online and print resources that would assist in the healing journey of women, and for strategies and programs that would bring those who abuse to accountability and justice. Collaborative community efforts are an excellent way to coordinate agencies and resources and we have highlighted the initiative in Calgary, called HomeFront.

Intimate partner violence will never be eradicated until the structures of our society that privilege certain people over others are named and resisted. Of course,

individual support for women victims should never be ignored, or sidelined, but we must continue to work to ensure that the political and structural dimensions of critical change are not forgotten (Proffitt 2000). While safety must always be our top priority for victims, ensuring justice and accountability for offenders is also critically important. While it is true that we have resources in our communities today, like transition houses, that were not available 50 years ago, many attitudes towards the rights and responsibilities of women have not changed.

The challenges are for you, our students and future leaders, to call on our elected representatives to ensure that services for both those who are abused and those who are abusers are in place at the community level and across our nation. It is critical that all men and women who work as first responders, like police, emergency workers, and medical teams, understand how to recognize abuse when it is presented to them. Our institutions, like the educational system and the legal system, have important roles to play in raising our collective awareness about abuse and responding with justice and compassion to those impacted by it. But nothing can ever take the place of individual men and women speaking out against injustice whenever and wherever it occurs. Everyone, young and old alike, needs to be on guard to ensure that every house is a safe one and every relationship free from abuse. The next time you pass a church, or a synagogue, or a mosque, ask yourself: is this a safe place to talk about intimate partner violence?

## 7 Questions for Critical Thought

1. What do you consider to be some of the most progressive strategies that a religious congregation might adopt to make their house of worship a safe place for victims and survivors of abuse?
2. What do you believe to be the major advantages of a collaborative community response to domestic violence? Are there any disadvantages?
3. What do you see as some of the ways that religious professionals might contribute to the work of eliminating intimate partner violence in our society?

## 8 Canadian Website Resources (Partially Adapted from [VAOnline.org](http://VAOnline.org) and [TheRAVEProject.org](http://TheRAVEProject.org))

Canadian National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-363-9010).

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-4-A-CHILD) where assistance is provided throughout North America in over 150 languages.

Alliance to End Violence is a resource centre in Calgary that offers excellent information and safety information for victims ([www.endviolence.ca](http://www.endviolence.ca)).

BC Association of Specialized Victim Service and Counselling Programs offers a provincial voice on the west coast of Canada and a plethora of community-based support services ([www.endingviolence.org](http://www.endingviolence.org)).

Canadian Forces Canadian/Family Resource Centres provide information and resource support for families connected to the Canadian Forces (<https://www.cfmws.com/en/AboutUs/MFS/aboutus/Pages/AboutMilitaryFamilyResourceCentres.aspx>).

National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence acts as a national clearinghouse for information, training programs, and monitoring of family violence amongst Aboriginal peoples (<http://nacafv.ca>).

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence Canada is an excellent website that offers education and resources on various aspects of family violence including elder abuse, child abuse, and sexual abuse ([www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/index-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/index-eng.php)).

Ontario Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse is a resource that offers training and advocacy related to the abuse in the lives of senior adults ([www.onpea.org](http://www.onpea.org)).

Ontario Women's Justice Network is an online legal resource for those attempting to understand more fully issues related to justice and the abuse of women and children (<http://owjn.org>).

The RAVE Project, standing for Religion and Violence e-Learning, is an extensive web-based resource related to violence in families associated with the Christian faith tradition. It offers a shelter map with contact information for every transition house in Canada and the United States. It provides information on safety plans and offers videos and on-line training modules ([www.theraveproject.org](http://www.theraveproject.org)).

## 9 Further Readings

Nason-Clark, N., Fisher-Townsend, B., Holtmann, C., & McMullin, S. (2018). *Religion and intimate partner violence: Understanding the challenges and proposing solutions*. New York: Oxford.

Based on research which spans a 25 year period, this book seeks to understand the trajectory of intimate partner violence in families of deep faith. Its focus on lived religion provides a powerful lens through which to investigate and assess ways in which religion contributes towards justice, accountability, healing, and wholeness for families experiencing abuse and violence.

Sevcik, I., Rothery, M., Nason-Clark, N., & Pynn, R. (2015). *Overcoming conflicting loyalties: Intimate partner violence, community resources, and faith*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.

This book focuses on the role of spirituality in the work that community-based agencies do to assist survivors of intimate partner violence by examining when and how religion and culture intersect in women's lives. It offers guidance for those who work with abused religious women in secular environments.

Williams, R. (Ed.). (2015). *Seeing religion: Toward a visual sociology of religion*. New York: Routledge.

In this edited collection, readers are presented with a wide scope and variety of religious practices that range from jewelry and articles of clothing to items found in people's homes and places of employment. *Seeing Religion* offers myriad examples of the application of visual methods to the scientific study of spirituality and religion.

Beyer, P., & Ramji, R. (Eds.). (2013). *Growing up Canadian: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists*. Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press.

Contributors to this volume explore religion and religious diversity amongst a generation of young Canadians who have immigrated to Canada in the post-1970 era. It is a comparative look at spirituality amongst young adults connected to immigrant families. Through the voices of these young men and women, the reader is able to appreciate more fully religious diversity and multiculturalism in Canada today.

## 10 Researcher Background

Nancy Nason-Clark is a professor of Sociology at the University of New Brunswick (in Canada) and the director of the RAVE Project, a research initiative that was funded by the Lilly Endowment <[www.theraveproject.org](http://www.theraveproject.org)>. She is the author of numerous books, including *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence* (with Fisher-Townsend, Holtmann, and McMullin; Oxford University Press, 2018), *Men Who Batter* (with Fisher-Townsend; Oxford University Press, 2015), *Overcoming Conflicting Loyalties* (with Sevcik, Rothery, and Pynn; University of Alberta Press, 2015) and *No Place for Abuse* (with Kroeger, IVP, 2nd ed., 2010). She has served as President of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, the Association for the Sociology of Religion, and the Religious Research Association, and two terms as editor of *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*.

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