

Mennonite Pastors' Response to Domestic Abuse

Isaac I. Block, *Mennonite Brethren Bible College*

Can the Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, through its official and traditional offices engage in significant ministries to persons caught in situations of domestic abuse? Prompted by a growing awareness that victims of domestic violence in my own faith tradition were seeking help and refuge outside of the church, I determined early in 1989 to study this issue. I designed a questionnaire to ask Winnipeg Mennonite pastors about their ministries to persons in abusive situations. What follows is a report of my findings together with some implications that grow out of this study. These findings do not represent the nature or frequency of domestic abuse among Mennonites in Winnipeg. That is the subject of a future study. Rather, they describe how this group of pastors approaches its ministry to persons in situations of domestic abuse. Because I am not duplicating an earlier study, the findings of this study are tentative and must await validation.

In May and June of 1989, 41 Mennonite pastors in the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba were surveyed to assess their ministry to victims of domestic abuse. The survey was conducted through personal interviews with each of the pastors.

The survey instrument has two basic parts. Part I deals with 23 ways of reacting to conflict situations in the family. Two questions are attached to each of these factors. First, "in the past twelve months, how many times did you hear your parishioners mention the following about their families?" If the answer is "never," the second question is asked. "Thinking back over the whole time that you've been a pastor, was there ever an occasion when your parishioner reported . . . (the same factors were explored)?" The term "parish" means all persons who reported an abusive situation to the pastors, without regard for their formal relationship with the church.

Part II of the instrument deals with demographics; the content of reports that pastors heard; difficulties in counselling experienced by the pastors; advice given by pastors; and opinion statements.¹

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Of the 41 pastors who were contacted, all agreed to participate in the survey. All of the interviews were conducted at the pastors' convenience.

Data Analysis

PART I

This part of the instrument can be divided into four subsections with each subsection representing a form of violence. These forms are physical, psychological, malicious tampering with pets and property, and a general category of "other." The most important summary of the data is the number of responses to each question. The figures given below are the lowest possible numbers for each category. Since the values on the instrument represent ranges, the actual frequency is higher than that which is shown. All of the data reflects the responses for the past twelve months.

Subsection 1. Physical Abuse

This subsection deals with the frequency of reported physical abuse during the past twelve months. The specific factors explored ranged from throwing or smashing objects to using a knife or firing a gun. A total of 341 instances were reported, including at least 8 cases in which a knife or a gun were used.

Subsection 2: Psychological Abuse

This subsection deals with the frequency of reported psychological abuse during the past twelve months. Pastors were asked to indicate the reported frequency of occurrences, ranging from verbal abuse to threatening someone with a knife or a gun. A total of 593 instances were reported for the twelve month period.

Subsection 3: Pets and Property

This subsection deals with the frequency of reported malicious tampering with pets and property in the past twelve months. The specific variables have to do with either destroying or selling a family member's favourite pet or property. A total of 68 instances were reported for the twelve month period.

Subsection 4: Other

This subsection consisted of only one factor, "Other." Pastors were asked to indicate the frequency of reported abuse during the past twelve months not covered by any of the above factors. A total of 88 instances were reported for the twelve month period. Of these, 45 were a variety of forms of sexual abuse and 13 were a variety of forms of manipulating family finances.

The total reported abuse within the past twelve months, using minimum figures, can be summarized as follows.

Physical abuse	341	31%
Psychological abuse	593	55%
Pets and Property	68	6%
Other	88	8%
TOTAL	<u>1,090</u>	<u>100%</u>

Two questions in Part II of the instrument are properly placed here for this analysis. One question asks, "Approximately how many people have you, as a pastor [total pastoral experience], counselled who made mention of being abused in their families?" The second question was, "How many of these persons were:

wives abused by husbands	319	40.21%
husbands abused by wives	60	7.55%
children abused by parents	212	26.72%
parents abused by children	93	11.76%
victims abused by relatives	73	9.24%
victims abused by strangers	26	3.27%
other	10	1.25%
TOTAL	<u>793</u>	<u>100.00%</u>

The total number of persons counselled during all of the years of their ministry, according to these findings, is 297 fewer than the minimum possible total reported in Part I. The instrument itself does not have a built in corrective. The explanation, however, may be in the methodology. The first section probes for details while the second one asks a general question. Either number represents a significant number of instances of domestic abuse reported to the Mennonite pastors in Winnipeg. For the pastors, each of these cases represent an opportunity for ministry.

Thirty-five of the 41 pastors estimated that the average education of the persons they counselled was High School or higher, while 30 pastors estimated that the socioeconomic status of the people they counselled was middle class.

PART II

1. Demographics

Pastors from five different Mennonite Conferences namely, Mennonite Brethren, General Conference Mennonites, Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church, Evangelical Mennonite Conference, and Somerfelder Mennonite were interviewed. The data was analyzed by Conferences. The differences by Conferences, however, were statistically insignificant.

The attendance at Sunday morning services ranged from 15 to more than 800. Ten churches reported an attendance of 50. The average attendance at the Sunday morning services was 232.

Twenty-three churches had one staff member, eight had two, seven had

three, and three churches were led by committees of unpaid persons. In each of the three instances, the chairperson of the leadership committee was interviewed. Two leaders were women. This variable is too small for significant analysis.

Using 50% to establish dominance, 32 churches were predominantly Canadian in origin; 1 was Western European; 4 were Eastern European; 1 was Portuguese; 2 were Asian; 1 was Spanish. Winnipeg Mennonites are clearly not a homogenous ethnic group.

Nine pastors had a Bible College education; 27 were seminary trained, and 5 were "Other." The "Other" ranged from no formal training for ministry to having an earned doctorate.

The estimated average size of the families in which persons received counsel was 4.9. On average, the persons receiving counsel were Christians for 6.7 years. Fourteen pastors reported that on average, the persons they counselled regarding abuse had been Christians 10 or more years. On average, the people receiving counsel regarding abuse were married 10.5 years. The range in this regard was from less than 1 year to 50 years. On average, the abuse began 2.65 years into the marriage. Twenty-two pastors reported that on average the abuse began before the second anniversary of the victims' marriages.

2. Parishioners' Reports

In this section pastors indicated the kinds of reports they heard from parishioners. Seventy-six percent heard reports of victims considering suicide. This indicates the intensity of the trap in which victims of abuse find themselves. It is also an indication of the level of trust that parishioners have in their pastors. Eighty-four percent of the pastors heard reports of victims of abuse who had sexual problems in their marriages. About half of the pastors received reports that people in abusive situations resorted to alcohol and drugs. College trained pastors received 30% more of these reports than did seminary trained pastors. Sixty-five percent of the pastors received reports that their parishioners had already seen a professional counsellor about problems of abuse. This statistic suggests a level of dissatisfaction with the help they received, or it reflects a need for pastoral care while they are in the counseling relationship, or both.

3. Difficulties in Counselling

The preamble to the next section is: "Which of the following difficulties did you have in counselling persons who experienced abuse?" The data suggests that pastors generally were not uncomfortable with this topic. Most pastors did not find it difficult to counsel victims of abuse because of their own

opposition to separation and divorce. What is more, in general, they did not find it difficult to counsel because of the attitude within the church toward this issue. Nor did they find it difficult on account of the religious doubts that parishioners express.

On the other hand, they admitted to frustration with their lack of information on the subject. All of the pastors with more than 16 years experience in the ministry admitted to this frustration. Pastors generally found the emotional demands difficult to handle. They found it difficult to counsel because they saw little progress. Fifty-six percent of pastors with under five years of experience admitted that lack of training was a problem. Seventy-three percent of pastors with up to ten years of experience also admitted that they had this difficulty. Furthermore, 100% of the pastors with 16 or more years of experience admitted to this difficulty. Interestingly, the more experienced pastors were, the more they felt the need for better training.

A more subjective way to assess the level of difficulty that pastors experience in counselling abused persons is to determine whether or not they preach on the subject and/or whether or not they discuss the subject with pastoral colleagues. Thirty-seven percent of the pastors surveyed have preached a sermon on the subject of abuse; 93% have discussed the issue with pastoral colleagues.

4. Pastoral Advice

This section of the instrument asks: "Which of the following advice would you give spouses whose partners are periodically abusive?" Only "Yes" or "No" responses were permitted. For pastors, this was one of the most difficult sections of the instrument. Its intent, however, was to force a specific response to a series of difficult variables. Many pastors wanted to qualify their responses, but finally decided on the response with which they would be most comfortable most of the time. Although Alsdorf's instrument uses "wife" as the subject and mine uses "spouse", in this section some comparisons can be made.

There were no college or seminary trained pastors who would advise victims of abuse to divorce immediately. Also, no seminary trained pastors would advise victims to separate immediately, while 11% of college trained pastors would offer this advice. When working with totals, 15% of pastors would counsel victims to leave the abusive spouse immediately; 7% would counsel them to separate immediately; and 2% would advise them to divorce immediately. This data corresponds favourably with 83% who said they would counsel victims to remain in the home while they seek professional counselling. Eighty-one percent of pastors said they would counsel victims to remain in the home while getting pastoral counselling.

Pastors generally held the view that professional and/or pastoral counselling offers more hope for victims than prayer and trust in God. Forty-six percent said they would counsel victims to be submissive and pray, trusting that God will change their spouses. The fact that 95% would counsel victims to see a doctor seems to be an indication that pastors generally were more protective of victims of physical abuse than of victims of other forms of abuse.

Ninety-three percent of pastors said they would contact the offending spouse if the victim and the offender were both members of the church. Seventy-six said they would contact the offending spouse if the victim were a church member and the offender were not a member of the church in which the victim was a member.

5. Pastors' Orientation

This section attempts to measure the attitudes and theological orientations with which pastors deal with issues of domestic abuse. By far the largest number of pastors generally believe women's reports of their abuse. Most of them do not deflect the blame from the abusing husband to the victimized wife. There is, however, a positive correlation between those few pastors who tend to disbelieve women's reports and those who insist on relationships of submission of the wife to her husband and to God. Alsdorf found the same positive correlation in his study. He concluded that "a theological perspective that emphasizes the proper role of a wife as one of submission to her husband may predispose a pastor to be distrustful of a woman's report of violence and to minimize its danger."²

This is the section in which pastors gave the clearest and strongest signals that attitudinally they were prepared to take the side of the victims. When pastors were asked, "Would you judge that a Christian spouse whose partner has been abusive to her/him has grounds for leaving?" 42% agreed if the abuse was severe; 29% agreed if the abuse was moderate; 20% agreed if the abuse was occasional; 7% agreed if the abuse was seldom; and 2% replied "Never." In Alsdorf's study, 33% agreed if the abuse was severe; 15% agreed if the abuse was moderate; 14% agreed if the abuse was occasional; 17% agreed if the abuse was seldom; and 21% replied "Never."³

One area in which pastors showed ambivalence was in their response to the opinion statement, "While violence by a spouse is not God's perfect will, it should not be overemphasized and used as justification for breaking the marriage commitment." Thirty-nine percent of the pastors agreed with this statement. In Alsdorf's study, 26% agreed with this statement.⁴ It should be noted that in my study, there were more pastors who said "Yes" in response to this statement, than when pastors were asked if they would counsel victims of abuse to leave the offending spouse.

In response to the question, "Do you agree that if a woman submits to

her husband as God desires, God will eventually honour her and either the abuse will stop or God will give her strength to endure it?" 15% said "Yes," while 85% said "No." In Alsdorf's study, 26% said "Yes," while 73% said "No."⁵

Several questions allowing for multiple choices were asked. Fifty-nine percent of the pastors *estimated* that spousal abuse occurs "Sometimes" among Christian couples. Only 5% of them estimated that it happens very often. Thirty-nine percent of the pastors held the view that domestic abuse is primarily a result of family conditioning. Thirty-one percent said it was a spiritual problem. And 10% said it was a psychological problem.

6. Analysis of Means

In this section the total abuse reported by pastors was analyzed. Comparisons were made by denomination, Sunday worship attendance, the number of staff, the pastors' education level, years in the pastorate, the age of the pastor, and recency of contact. There is a significant difference for education level and the number of years in the pastorate. Seminary trained pastors counsel twice as many victims of abuse as college trained pastors, and college trained pastors counsel about twice as many victims of abuse as pastors in the "Other" category. This seems to suggest that victims of abuse seeking help from the church look for people with training and full professional academic credentials.

Pastors with fewer than six years of pastoral experience have counselled relatively few victims of abuse. However, when this data is translated into averages per year, pastors with one to three years of experience have counselled significantly more persons than those with longer tenure.

Implications

What are the implications of these findings for the Winnipeg Mennonite churches' ministry to persons caught in situations of domestic abuse? First of all, pastors should assume that their particular parish is not unique in that it is either safer or less safe than other parishes. Domestic abuse is a fact of life. Based on the findings of this study, pastors should assume that behind the middle class Christian facade, a significant number of parishioners are caught in abusive situations. They should assume that significantly more women than men are victims, and more men than women are abusers.

Secondly, victims of domestic abuse are turning to the church for help. Given this fact, the church must engage in some immediate tasks that will enable it to minister more effectively to these persons. Pastors must make a deliberate decision about their commitment to the sanctity of personhood.

Will they be as committed to the sanctity of personhood as they are to the permanence of marriage? Should the commitment to the sanctity of personhood have priority over the commitment to the permanence of marriage? Winnipeg Mennonite pastors are ambivalent about these issues at the present time. Were they to give higher priority to the sanctity of personhood than to the permanence of marriage, this would be reflected in the counsel that is given by the pastors. It would require a major change in the pastors' approach to counselling. They would then counsel victims of abuse to remove themselves from the abuser and go to a safe place. Only after the victims' safety had been assured would pastors begin other counselling.

Thirdly, churches that will commit themselves to providing safety for victims of abuse will have to decide to what extent they wish to provide shelter and counselling services to these people. Even if they should choose to provide their own services, they should consider networking with secular organizations whose purpose is to provide similar services. If they choose to provide their own services, these services should be staffed by persons trained in abuse counselling and therapy. Unless they have majored specifically in pastoral counselling in their Master of Divinity programs, pastors are generalists and not adequately trained in the specific field of abuse counselling and therapy.

Fourthly, if the Mennonite pastors want to minister effectively to persons in abusive situations, they will have to re-examine their theology of submission. At issue is the matter of dominance and power rather than submission. Many of the churches' traditions and structures are based on a theology of dominance and control. These theologies will have to be revisited and significant changes will have to be made to the structures and traditions.

Fifthly, churches must become more open about the issue of abuse. They can do this by announcing how they network with other organizations, and by assuring people that they will receive a compassionate hearing in which their personhood will be respected.

Sixthly, based on the findings of this study, the inter-Mennonite setting seems like the most logical place to initiate discussions and programs.

Conclusion

There seems to be a general climate of readiness among Mennonite pastors in Winnipeg to deal in a serious way with the issue of abuse in their parishes. It must be said to the pastors' credit that they were willing to become vulnerable and participate in this study. That in itself is an indication that they take the problem of abuse seriously and are willing to dialogue on the issue. The fact that the disposition of a large percentage of pastors is to believe the reports of abuse bodes well for the future of ministry by Mennonite pastors to persons in abusive situations.

Notes

¹Part II of the survey instrument is based in part on a questionnaire prepared by Jim Alsdorf. It was changed and adapted for this study. The report of Alsdorf's study was first published under the title, "Wife Abuse and the Church: the Response of Pastors," in *Response*, Winter, 1985, pp. 9-11. Alsdorf and his wife Phyllis have since elaborated on their findings in their book, *Battered Into Submission* (Downers Grove: InverVarsity Press, 1989).

Alsdorf's study differs from this one in two significant ways. First, his was a study of pastoral ministry in wife abuse. Mine is a study of pastoral ministry in domestic abuse generally, rather than in wife abuse specifically. While my study pays some specific attention to wife abuse, I generally use inclusive language to prevent prejudgment of the findings. Secondly, Alsdorf's sample was self selected. His instrument was sent to pastors on the mailing list of a theologically conservative, evangelical publishing company. Only those who chose to do so, completed and returned the instrument. My study is limited to pastors of Mennonite Churches inside the city limits of Winnipeg. All Mennonite pastors in the geographical area participated.

²Alsdorf, *Response*, 10, 11.

³Ibid., 10.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.