Theology Papers and Journal Articles   School of Theology

2017

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Article

'When She Calls for Help'—Domestic Violence in Christian Families

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Abstract: Violence in relationships is a common experience for a significant number of women. VicHealth (Australia) has noted that one of the underlying and contributing factors towards violence against women is their environment, citing 'faith-based institutions' such as churches as one such environment for many women. Indeed, international research shows that the language of religion is often used by women to explain abuse. Additionally, abused Christian women are more likely to remain in or return to unsafe relationships, citing religious beliefs to support avoidance of 'family break-ups' despite abuse. In contrast, however, churches can address domestic violence within a context of care, with emphasis on a theology of biblical equality. This paper examines how domestic violence may be supported by Christian language and belief, and suggests an 'alternate theology' concerning religious language in concepts of gender roles, sacrifice, submission, and suffering. It reviews current research on the connection between Christian religious language and domestic violence against women, to highlight the Christian church's role as a contributing factor to such abuse. Finally, the paper makes some suggestions on how religious language can, in contrast to perpetuating abuse through norms, sever the connections between domestic violence and religious language.

Keywords: domestic violence; religion; families; women; abuse; theology; language

1. Introduction

Violence in relationships is a common experience for a significant number of women. To use an Australian statistic as an example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) reports that one in three women have experienced physical violence in relationships, with women being five times more likely than men to require medical attention or hospitalisation due to intimate partner violence. The United Nations defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (World Health Organisation 2016). This includes intimate partner violence (IPV), which describes the behaviour of an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm. Such intimate partner abuse and sexual violence is most often perpetrated by men against women, with a 2013 WHO analysis reflecting the fact that, world-wide, almost one third (30%) of women who have been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from their intimate partner.

As a woman and a theologian, such statistics cause me to ponder the prevalence of domestic violence in Christian, religious families. Does religion have a role in perpetuating domestic violence, or in silencing sufferers of such violence? What is the prevalence of domestic violence in religious, specifically Christian, families? VicHealth (2007) notes that one of the underlying and contributing factors towards violence against women is their environment, citing "faith-based institutions" such as churches as one such environment for many women. Robert Wuthnow, in his work on the sociology of religion, writes of religion as representing social norms and cultural understandings that have become

embedded in the religion itself, in its practice, language, and structures of power. Such norms and power structures can contribute to individuals' perpetration of domestic violence and to the silencing of those who suffer (Wuthnow 2004). Research by theologian Rod Buxton demonstrates the contrast that exists in some Christian churches between offering hope for those in need while registering domestic violence as a taboo subject for discussion (Buxton 2000). Finally, the patriarchal language of Christian religions can be criticised as being conducive to the submission of women and thus acting as a contributing factor to domestic violence in some Christian families (McMullin et al. 2012).

This paper acknowledges the research on domestic violence in religious, non-Christian families see *A Commentary on Religion and Domestic Violence* by Fortune et al. (2010). However, this paper has a focus specifically on domestic violence against women in Christian families, and aims to (a) provide a brief overview of some significant literature concerning domestic violence in Christian families in the Western world; (b) examine how Christian religious language perpetuates domestic violence; and (c) make some suggestions on how religious language can be changed to help sever the connection between Christian religious language and abuse. The focus of this paper is reviewing research on domestic violence in Christian families, to address the role of religious language as a contributory factor in such abuse. The paper thus adds to the discussion concerning the role of Christian churches in the primary prevention of domestic abuse.

2. Brief Overview of Literature Concerning Domestic Violence in Christian Families in the Western World

Carol Winkelmann portrays the experience of abused women in her book *The Language of Battered Women: A Rhetorical Analysis of Personal Theologies* (Winkelmann 2004). Winkelmann spent nine years with women in refuges or shelters, discussing individual experiences and personal understanding of theology stemming from their participation in Christian churches. Her research highlights the fact that the language of religion is often used by women to explain abuse. The women in Winkelmann's research used religious imagery to discuss suffering and evil, for example. While such language often assists the women in recovery of abuse, many of the women themselves noted that their local churches also offered strong support for a convention of patriarchal marriage and the attendant abuse that was suffered by the women in such marriages. Indeed, several women talked of their previous acceptance of abuse with use of religious language that implied submission and, as one writer described, the notion that such suffering and violence was "their lot" in life (McMullin et al. 2012).

Additionally, abused Christian women are more likely to remain in or return to unsafe relationships, citing religious beliefs to support such decisions. Christian women who suffer domestic violence display a tendency to use Christian symbolism and religious language to explain or tolerate abuse, and to remain in or return to marriages that contain domestic violence (Nason-Clark 2009). What, though, is the prevalence of intimate partner domestic violence in Christian families? Katrina Kelmendi argues that research on domestic violence was not undertaken until the 1960s because of cultural norms that refused to consider it a problem with consequences (Kelmendi 2013). Furthermore, research on intimate partner domestic violence in the general population has been critiqued as providing a less than accurate picture of the experience of abuse due to operational definitions of violence, risk factors associated with methodology, and similar concerns (Knickmeyer et al. 2016). This failure to provide an accurate picture of IPV is relevant particularly to research on Christian families. For example, Knickmeyer et al. (2016) describe the failure of studies on religious affiliation and domestic violence in Canada and the US to identify the role of patriarchy in IPV, focusing instead solely on denominational relationships, if any. However, qualitative research (see, for example, research by Knickmeyer et al. (2016) with women from different Christian denominations; data collected by Levitt and Ware (2006) in the Memphis, Tennessee area of the US; and Nason-Clark (2009) in Atlantic Canada) supports the findings of a 2006 study by the UK Anglican Bishops' Council that 'incidence of domestic abuse within church...congregations is similar to the rate within the general population.' In other words, the prevalence of domestic violence in Western Christian families correlates with the

prevalence of such violence in the general population. What differs, however, is what has been called the added "vulnerability" of Christian women, who speak of both abuse and marriage in spiritual overtones (McMullin et al. 2012). Such women use religious language to describe why they remain in or return to relationships that involve domestic violence, citing the undesirability of divorce, the need to love and honour husbands, and the power of forgiveness and prayer to generate change in the abuser. It is the religious language that perpetuates and/or tolerates domestic violence (Nason-Clark 2009).

Furthermore, feminist scholarship has highlighted the historical role of male power and dominance, especially over women, and how this in many societies has led to an imbalance of power and abuse (Watts and Zimmerman 2002). Kersti Yllo notes that men often display a "disproportionate" share (and sense) of power in church settings and structures and that this interplay between gender and power in leadership subtly complements notions of inequality which can turn towards perpetration or toleration of abuse (Yllo 2005, p. 19). It is natural to posit that the same tendency exhibited in church structures can reflect and perpetuate an imbalance of power. For example, the recent Royal Commission into sex abuse in the Catholic Church in Australia noted that a hierarchical structure in the church that, consciously or unconsciously, promotes "the interests" of those in authority in the church and seeks to "protect the privilege and power" can be one of the multitude of factors that lead to abuse or silencing of victims (Commonwealth of Australia 2017, Introduction). One can hypothesise that similar structures in other Christian churches could be a contributory factor to intimate partner violence.

As a means of addressing the issue of domestic violence in Christian families, different Christian denominations within Australia have initiated programmes that foster awareness of the issue coupled with training of pastors, church leaders, and church communities in appropriate responses to women who suffer domestic abuse. The Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, a diocese that encourages women pastors, has promulgated the *Preventing Violence Against Women* document in conjunction with VicHealth, that discusses "whole church" initiatives aimed at the primary prevention of domestic violence (preventing violence before it occurs through awareness and the refusal to tolerate such abuse (Bodd 2013, pp. 5–6)). While the primary prevention of violence involves social and causal change (Bodd 2013, p. 6), the programmes advocated by the Melbourne Anglican Diocese fail to address possible causal issues that relate to theological language concerning marriage. The programmes instead choose to focus on factors that may indicate the presence of abuse (Bodd 2013, p. 15). Indeed, some participants from church communities within the programme expressed disbelief that domestic violence occurred in their church families:

> "At a staff meeting the issue was raised: is there anyone around the table that's had any sniff of, any hint of . . . um . . . abuse be it physical, emotional . . . [it was decided that] we can point to areas where relationships are under strain but there's no abuse" (Bodd 2013, p. 29).

Similarly, the Catholic Bishops' Council in Victoria (Australia) has produced a pastoral statement on violence against women, and established parish resource kits to instigate awareness of domestic violence in local parishes. These resources state that:

> "Our goal must be a society where all people are safe in their home, families, and close relationships;...and where all relationships respect the equality and dignity of each person. This is part of the Gospel vision of love and respect." (Catholic Bishops' Council of Victoria).

The document, however, emphasises responses to domestic violence and not an examination of causal factors. While a general mention is made of the need for the church and church communities to "reflect on our own attitudes" towards domestic violence (Catholic Bishops' Council of Victoria, p. 2) the material does little more than state the need for such reflection. The material, rather, places sole focus on practical measures to help those who have experienced abuse. The document acts as a secondary and tertiary preventative resource against domestic violence. It fails to identify the church's role in the primary prevention of abuse through lack of analysis of possible causal factors in church structure, language, and practice.

In a similar vein, Hillsong church in Australia, associated with evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, has programmes to address issues of domestic violence, with counselling, transition homes, and advocacy resources that state "Bullying and controlling behaviour and violence on any person is never acceptable" (Hillsong 2017). These materials and practical measures, however, do not examine how the "soft complementarianism" of the church (Riches and Jennings 2016), in which notions of male headship in the family are supported, may contribute to domestic violence. This is of significance given that research in the U.S. demonstrates that 24% of Christian women who have suffered domestic violence name the use of the language of submission and male leadership in marriage as being cited by their spouse in support of abuse (Levitt et al. 2008, pp. 444–45). Additionally, Christian women in Protestant churches that teach complementarianism in marriage women have also been cited as stating that concepts of wifely submission to husbands as the head of the home contributed to their choices to remain in or return to marriages that exhibited domestic violence (Levitt et al. 2008, p. 446).

Although the theological motivations behind the above-named programmes are sound, exhibiting the virtues of charity and mercy, the documents fail to address the root causes of domestic violence. This paper, on the other hand, articulates the notion that one contributory factor to domestic violence is the role of Christian religious language.

3. How Christian Language Perpetuates Violence

A cross-denominational study of Christian women who had experienced domestic violence in their marriage found that the women felt compelled to present a facade of the perfect Christian woman and family in local church communities (Knickmeyer et al. 2016). The need for the facade was often facilitated by the language of Christianity, with overtones of the perfect wife (Proverbs 31) and discussion in women's groups on submitting to their husbands, with women tending to 'close ranks' around the abuser to protect the institution of marriage.

In discussing the Christian religious language that perpetuates domestic violence, one can categorise use of language in several key areas. The first concerns women's submission and male leadership; the second centres on the sanctity of marriage; and the third connects the value of suffering to the virtue of forgiveness. Women in various studies cite language and concepts in each of these categories that were used particularly by their husbands and local pastors to support staying in the marriage regardless of domestic violence.

3.1. Women's Submission and Male Leadership

While studies have demonstrated that Christian men are no more likely to be abusers than men in the general population and that religious affiliation according to denomination and/or liberal/conservative Christian views does not predict the likelihood of domestic violence (Wang et al. 2009), there remains the fact that Christian women who have suffered domestic violence cite the use of religious language to accept abuse (Knickmeyer et al. 2016). For example, one participant in the cross-denominational study described use of religious language to condone abuse:

> "And that's something my husband always put in front of me when we were fighting. 'Uh, you Catholic, and you suppose to be at home, and you suppose to have sex, the Bible says you supposed to, uh, do whatever your husband wants in sex.' . . . I was supposed to have as many children as he wanted to" (Knickmeyer et al. 2016, p. 9).

The use of the Bible or church teaching to substantiate abuse is significant for, as Michel Foucault noted, language as discourse structures our knowledge and vision of the world (Foucault 1972). Religious language, indeed, can structure a vision that either upholds or abhors domestic violence, with Miles (1999) arguing that the language of biblical equality in marriage can be employed to assist those suffering domestic violence. In contrast, the assignation of power in Christian religious language, using terms such as headship and male leadership, often leads to men abusing the power that is seemingly bestowed on them in marriage. Investigation of IPV highlights the fact that such violence occurs most

frequently in families where there exists a male dominated imbalance of power (Levitt et al. 2008). Even Christian churches that discuss a servanthood role of male leadership in marriage nevertheless reinforce a male dominated imbalance of power with the result that benevolent sexism is promoted (Levitt et al. 2008). Indeed, a study of Christian male perpetrators of domestic violence suggests that the men themselves see masculinity and power as being interrelated (Wang et al. 2009) language of submission and male leadership in marriage as being cited by their spouse in support of abuse (Knickmeyer et al. 2004). Finally, these women also state that concepts of wifely submission to husbands as the head of the home contributed to their choices to remain in or return to marriages that exhibited domestic violence (Knickmeyer et al. 2004).

3.2. The Sanctity of Marriage

In one survey of faith leaders, a predominant theme concerning IPV was the balancing of safety with the sanctity of marriage (Ware et al. 2003). Many pastors, for example, cited the statement 'God hates divorce' to support the intervention and counselling that should occur within families that experience domestic violence rather than advocating separation or divorce (Ware et al. 2003). Women in the cross-denominational study cited similar language, mentioning the sacredness of the contract of marriage before God as one reason why they initially chose to remain in abusive marriages (Knickmeyer et al. 2016). Such religious language concerning marriage as a sacrament or a sacred bond has caused a tension for women and for the faith leaders to whom they turn to help. If marriage is seen as indissoluble, should the response to domestic violence avoid separation and divorce, for example? For many women, the choice to remain in abusive marriages was tied to religious belief concerning the sanctity of marriage as an institution to be preserved. Indeed, as Levitt and Ware (2006) have described, faith leaders themselves struggle to be aware of appropriate responses to domestic violence within the context of language that describes marriage as a sacred, unbreakable bond.

3.3. The Value of Suffering and the Virtue of Forgiveness

Christian religious language often presents the concept of mercy with the association of forgiveness as a virtue. For many Christian women who have suffered IPV, the language of forgiveness is pivotal to their response to domestic violence, especially to initial incidences of such violence (Wang et al. 2009). For example, one woman who suffered domestic violence described the power of the language of forgiveness as such:

> "Uh, I forgive him, because that's my religion. We forgive the husbands. We take it, you know, and you give chances to people . . . If God forgave us, we forgive them. That's how it is. We're taught that" (Wang et al. 2009, p. 9).

Describing the forgiveness of God in the language of forgiving others regardless of actions restructures experience. For Christian women in several studies the need to forgive shaped their acceptance of domestic violence with the requirement to give abusive spouses a second (or third, or fourth, and so on) chance. One study of evangelical Christian women in Canada and the U.S. found that although women's spiritual beliefs could enrich their recovery from abuse, for most of the women involved in the study, the spiritualisation of the problem by those who hold positions of authority in the church, with use of language that attributes power and transformation to forgiveness, meant that the abusive spouse was excused (Giesbrecht and Sevcik 2000). The result in many cases was that the women themselves experienced blame for any lack of forgiveness. As one participant in the study described it:

> "I felt like the Lord was saying to me 'don't feel sorry for yourself, you have to forgive this guy'...I went and apologised to him [my husband] for [him] being abusive to me" (Giesbrecht and Sevcik 2000).

The language of redemptive suffering tied to Christian talk of forgiveness tends to encourage Christian women to return to or remain in abusive marriages (Brock and Parker 2001).

4. How Religious Language Can Be Changed to Sever the Connection between Christian Language and Abuse

Knickmeyer et al. (2016) describe how religious communities can help those who suffer or have suffered domestic violence while also working to prevent such violence. They suggest a multi-faceted approach including practical assistance. This paper, in turn, has focused on how religious language perpetuates domestic violence and can encourage women to remain in or return to abusive marriages. Thus, the suggestions of this paper, though exploratory, centre on changing the use of Christian language to foster biblical equality. Equality in Christ is an important concept in both Catholic and Protestant churches, with examples in Scripture, for example, Galatians 3:28 (Bodd 2013).

The Anglican Church UK Archbishops' Council's document on domestic violence has called language that perpetuates domestic abuse a "harmful theology" that emphasises power and power structures (Anglican Church UK Archbishops' Council 2006). The document instead describes God in language of respect for others alongside compassion for all, with a subversion of power, citing Christ's ministry as an example of such subversion of power and authority. Furthermore, the document denotes freedom as being central to the Christian doctrine; the language of freedom can thus be liberating when combined with the language of respect and dignity. The Christian church can speak of the respect due to each person made in the image of God, mirroring the respect and care shown for others by Christ, and the corresponding dignity with which each person should be treated. Freedom then, of necessity, requires freedom from abuse.

Christian language concerning the virtue of forgiveness and suffering can also reflect the discussion of the virtue of justice. Forgiveness does not require acceptance of the injustice of domestic violence, but demands that justice be served for those who suffer. Similarly, religious language concerning marriage and divorce can focus not only on the institution of marriage itself but on the individuals within the marriage. As a result, the institution of marriage will not be seen to be more sacred or worthy of respect than the individuals themselves, who should be treated with dignity and to whom justice is due (considering the justice due to the those who have suffered domestic violence).

Language shapes our understanding and experience. Changing Christian religious language to discuss respect, dignity, compassion, freedom, and justice (important tenets in the Christian faith) can provide a way of correcting religious language while encouraging discourse on these pivotal Christian beliefs. The use of language to reinforce dignity, freedom, and justice can then foster such concepts to be lived in practice in faith communities, to help those who have suffered domestic violence, and to sever the connection between Christian language, practice, and abuse. Practical measures, including training faith leaders in their understanding of IPV, are of paramount importance. Yet the changing of Christian language to reflect Christianity's commitment to justice, dignity, and compassion will also help prevent the cycle of domestic violence, for the change denotes theological correction:

> "Theological correction requires critical awareness both of ideas which are being expressed and the context in which they are expressed. It must extend not only to sermons and formal teaching, but also to the use of hymns, symbols and metaphors, and the everyday actions which are informed by belief in God. It [theological correction] also calls for imagination and sensitivity in using potentially problematic language and doctrines..." (Anglican Church UK Archbishops' Council 2006, Appendix 1).

Theological correction of Christian religious language can be one important factor in preventing the perpetration of domestic violence. Correction of Christian religious language can focus on language in practice (in hymns, preaching, prayers, scripture translations, liturgy), language concerning suffering, and language that focuses on marriage and gender roles.

4.1. Changing Christian Religious Language in Practice

The literature overview above has pinpointed the role of religious language in perpetuating toleration or endurance of abuse. As philosopher Simone Weil stated, when we use language

to speak of God, we use language, with its limitations, that also fails to speak fully of God (Weil 1977). When different denominations within the Christian church speak of marriage, gender roles, a loving or indeed a wrathful God, for example, the language used (in theology as an academic discipline, in church documents, in liturgies and prayers, in church groups and classes) reveals much of us as humans with our beliefs often rooted in social, cultural, and historical factors. This affects the interpretation of theological concepts (McFague 1982, p. 2). If, for example, I attribute violent or demanding power attitudes to God, or see the human-divine relationship as a model of domination and submission, the language used to describe God can perpetuate notions of 'righteous' violence, domination, and power structures in my everyday actions or understanding of daily events (McFague 1982, pp. 2–4). Rather, churches can reorder, rewrite, and translate some of the metaphorical language used in religious practice, including some examples of prayers or hymns used in worship, to illustrate more clearly the theological notions of dignity, equality, freedom, and justice. One such example is the Anglican collect (prayer) that highlights God's power as merciful rather than as wrathful: "God declares his almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity." This reinforces mercy within relationships in the place of headship, authority, and dominance.

An awareness of the effect of religious language will allow Christian truth to be portrayed and upheld with consideration of context and clarification. Religious language that can seem to encourage dominance, power, and submission can be corrected to demonstrate the love of Christ, whose "power is at the service of the weak and vulnerable, and stands in judgement on all abuse and violence" (Anglican Church UK Archbishops' Council 2006, p. 22). Examining and correcting religious language requires that the church, in both language and practice, act as a primary preventative factor in combating domestic violence.

4.2. Changing Christian Religious Language Concerning Suffering

Church leaders often encourage women to forgive their partners who have been abusers. This is rooted in a theology of forgiving as Christ has forgiven us and, indeed, is encouraged by some counsellors as part of a recovery from abuse process (Taylor). However, intimate partner violence is one instance where forgiveness of abuse that happens while women remain in the relationship has been linked to toleration and continuation of abuse, aligned with safety concerns for women and children. First, intimate partner violence often involves the abusing spouse rationalising their abuse, many times with use of spiritual language. Forgiveness of the violence can fuel such rationalisations rather than acting to halt the abuse (Cavanagh et al. 2001, p. 696). Second, one contributory factor to intimate partner violence is the uneven balance of power in relationships. Forgiveness on the part of those women who have suffered abuse can reinforce inequality in relationships and can lead to the endurance of abuse without providing a solution to domestic violence (Lamb 2002).

Many times, forgiveness is connected to notions of redemptive suffering, here defined as a theological concept that describes a value to suffering in recognition of God's redemption of individuals and the world, tied to the image of Christ as a suffering servant. As philosopher and Episcopalian priest Marilyn McCord Adams noted, in redemptive suffering lies the idea that value exists in the suffering of the victim; value to God, to the abuser, and to the victim (Adams 1986). However, as Adams wrote, redemptive suffering cannot be prescribed for those who suffer. The danger in offering or prescribing redemptive suffering as a solution to women who are abused lies in physical, emotional, and mental harm, for both the woman and her children, without a guarantee that the suffering will offer an answer to the problem of evil. Furthermore, the language of forgiveness and redemptive suffering tends be offered, in the response of the church to domestic violence, as a one-sided solution to the victim and not the perpetrator, and is often used as a preventative to 'breaking up a marriage'. To preach forgiveness without justice, however, is to imply that forgiveness is a theologically isolated event. Changing religious language concerning suffering and forgiveness to emphasise the role of the cardinal virtue of justice, a virtue already of significance in Christianity, can stress forgiveness that is

not coerced nor requires acceptance of the injustice of domestic violence. Instead, religious language in preaching and counselling, for example, can demand that justice be served for those who suffer.

4.3. Changing Christian Religious Language Concerning Marriage

Christian egalitarianism has been described as a theological position that holds that all people are equal before God, and therefore have equal responsibility to serve God in roles and ministries without regard for gender, race, or class (Bodd 2013). Therefore, in marriage, and within the church hierarchy, an egalitarian position would be exemplified by shared authority and responsibilities with shared roles for both men and women. This contrasts with the complementarian view that teaches equality of men and women before God within an understanding of male-female differences so that different roles are "ascribed to men and women" in both church communities and family structures (Bodd 2013, p. 15). The relationship of each position to the prevalence and endurance of domestic violence has been noted by (Miles 1999, pp. 32–35) who argues that even a soft complementarianism supports an imbalance of power in marriage that can lead to abuse. The language of biblical equality in marriage can be employed to assist those suffering domestic violence, in changing understandings of marriage and male-female roles of authority.

Research underlines the contributory role of language such as male headship and wifely submission in the responses of Christian men who have perpetrated abuse, echoed in the statements of Christian women who have endured such abuse (Knickmeyer et al. 2004, pp. 54–82). This represents the relationship between the language of complementarianism and the prevalence and endurance of domestic violence. Instead, the application of egalitarian and inclusive language in Christian churches, especially when speaking of marriage and the family, can act in the promotion of equality, and in the primary prevention of domestic violence. The interpretation in biblical exegesis of inclusive language can illuminate scriptural teaching that would promote the "pattern of Christ" so that "patterns of domination and submission" will be "transformed in the mutuality of love, faithful care, and sharing of burdens (Anglican Church UK Archbishops' Council 2006, p. 19).

5. Conclusions

Domestic violence in Christian families is exacerbated with the use of Christian religious language that signifies a toleration of imbalance of power and abuse. Such language can be cross-denominational and occur in both religious practice and discussion. An overview of literature concerning domestic violence in Christian families illustrates the role of religious language concerning marriage, women's roles, and forgiveness in perpetuating and tolerating abuse, often regardless of religious affiliation or denomination. Correction of such language, in religious practice, preaching, and biblical interpretation, is a monumental and lengthy task that begins, as this paper has noted, with increasing an awareness of the problem of harmful religious language. Indeed, Christian churches, in building a response to domestic violence, should examine the role of religious language in practice, in church structures, in liturgy, and in programmes concerning marriage and counselling. Such examination, coupled with a reworking of language to represent egalitarianism in Christian churches, is supported by scripture, by the example of Christ's ministry, and by the cardinal virtues extolled by Christianity. The correction of language that attributes power to male partners in marriage and an overview of the teaching of forgiveness, so that forgiving can be linked to justice and dignity, requires Christian churches to work towards the primary prevention of domestic abuse. The role of Christian language as one contributory factor in domestic violence can be identified and rectified, to sever the connection between religious language and abuse.

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