

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & THE CULTURE OF YOUR CHURCH

The culture you cultivate in your church can play an important part in both preventing violence and providing a safe space for victims of violence to find support. Conversely, church cultures can also serve to facilitate violence and to be a place where victims do not feel they are able to find support. There are four ways you can work to create a culture of safety. Read through the description, answer the questions with an open heart and mind, and determine what action you can take to create a more healthy culture.

Visibility

Church leadership systems that are predominantly male can create a “blokey” environment in which it is thought normal for men to be in control; things that interest men are spoken about in church gatherings more often than things that interest women; where men’s perspectives on issues dominate; and where it is perceived that men’s interests and voices are considered more important than women’s. This can make it difficult for women who are abused to trust that their situation will be treated fairly.

1. What proportion of your main church leadership group are women?
2. What proportion of those who lead your Sunday gatherings are women?

Vulnerability

Like all people, members of churches want to present the best of themselves to those around them. This can create a culture in which achievement is celebrated and failure is not recognised. The Christian household is perceived as one that is happy, harmonious and has life together. Such an environment can leave victims of abuse feeling they dare not admit their household is anything but perfect.

1. Does the preaching in your church acknowledge the struggles and questions the preacher faces in living out faith?



2. Do you feature people's stories of challenge, weakness and failure and how faith helped them negotiate these?

Theology

Religious abusers often draw upon Biblical themes of male headship and wifely submission to manipulate their victims. Similarly, religious victims often draw on biblical themes of suffering and submission to believe they must endure their abuse.

1. If your church has a theology of gender equality, how is this expressed in your language about God, life and relationships? In what ways do you empower women and children to assert themselves?
2. If your church has a theology of male leadership, how do you communicate it in such a way that abusive men do not hear it as endorsing their violence and women and children in abusive situations do not hear it as God's call to tolerate abuse? In what ways do you empower women and children to assert themselves?

Awareness

Simply making people aware that domestic abuse is a problem, that there are likely people in the church experiencing it, and that you have safe avenues for people to seek help and support, can increase the likelihood of your church being a safe place.

1. In what ways and how frequently do you build awareness of domestic violence, child abuse, and other issues facing households within your church?
2. Does your church participate in and prioritise safe spaces programming?
3. Do you have a protocol for responding to issues of domestic violence and other forms of household abuse? Do the members of your congregation know about this?



4. Do you have people within the congregation who sit outside the church leadership structure and are identified as people from whom help can be sought?

