

SEXUALITY

Is the dam of sexual assault breaking on the Church?

by Peter Horsfield

In May 1990, Australian Ministry published an anonymous fable on sexual harassment by a clergyman. Among the responses were four complaining about the inappropriateness of publishing an article about a situation they were aware of while it was still fresh in people's minds. However, three of the responses came from different parts of Australia, the fourth from New Zealand and each referred to a different situation. On the 15th March this year, the ABC aired a controversial *Compass* program on sexual assault by clergy. In the 40 hours following the broadcast, upward of 270 calls were received by Sexual Assault Centres throughout Australia reporting experiences of violence by women within the church. At least 140 of these calls named clergy and male church leaders as perpetrators of the assault. For around half of these callers, this was the first time they had told anybody about the assault.

The social consciousness about the appropriateness and acceptability of violence against women is changing. Violence against women within the home, workplace and streets is still common and is still seen by many Australians as acceptable and even normal. But largely through the long and hard efforts of women's groups, those attitudes are being challenged and the social controls of silence and meek submission imposed on women are being broken.

As women begin to talk about their experiences of violence, and as their reality begins to be recognised, a damning picture is emerging. Research, while difficult to undertake in what has been such a secretive and unacknowledged area, shows the following.

- One out of ten women will be

raped in their lifetime. Rape of women occurs in 7%-12% of all marriages.

- Thirty-eight percent of girls (9% of boys) will be sexually assaulted in some way by the time they are eighteen years of age. Incest takes place in one out of ten homes.

- Ninety-three percent of victims of sexual assault are female. Ninety-eight percent of offenders are male. There is no "typical" female victim: women victims come from all ages, classes, cultures, races and creeds. Likewise there is no "typical" male attacker: male attackers commonly look and act like ordinary men and come from all social classes, income levels, races and age groups.

- One major survey found that Australian women are more at risk of sexual attack or harassment than women in 13 other Western nations.

- Eighty percent of women victims

and 76% of female child victims know the man who assaulted them. A child sexual offender in the overwhelming majority of instances is the father, stepfather, mother's de facto partner, brother, uncle or grandfather of the child victim. Contrary to popular belief, most sexual assaults against women and children are not random acts: they are calculated exploitations of trust relationships.

Women are encouraged to speak out

Social legislation is encouraging women to speak out. The Sex Discrimination Act became law in 1985 and made sexual harassment in the workplace illegal. A major advertising campaign SHOUT (Sexual Harassment is OUT) has been undertaken advising young women workers that sexual harassment in the workplace is illegal and encouraging them to complain about it.

Recent legislative changes and legal decisions in different states in Australia also reflect a changing social climate, defining violence within the home as criminal behaviour, giving police added powers to act in domestic situations, removing the long-standing legal principle of the right of a husband to have non-mutual sex with his wife, and changing rape laws to clarify am-

biguity and remove evidentiary bias towards the rapist and against the victim.

Changes are not easy

This alone doesn't solve the problem. The entrenched attitudes and patriarchal structures that have perpetuated such violence are not easily changed. It may be expected also that there will be a defensive and perhaps violent reaction by male groups and individuals who feel that by women's standing up for themselves their male power is being denuded, their ego undermined, their "normal" behaviour challenged, and that an attempt is being made to feminise (emasculate) them.

But this changing social attitude is providing an incentive for women to begin to act on something that previously they had simply accepted and absorbed at great physical and emotional cost.

Whereas once women had little alternative but to stay in and endure a violent relationship, increasingly they are choosing to leave. In 1983-84, the 126 women's shelters around Australia assisted approximately 31,000 women and children. In NSW in one year alone, 23,000 women were turned away from women's refuges because of lack of space.

As social awareness is raised and as more effective procedures are developed, women are increasingly reporting the violence and taking legal action. The reporting of violence by women has increased. In the mid-eighties, Victorian Police reported 39,000 calls involving domestic

violence in one year in the metropolitan area alone.

One would expect that where a social group uncovers and addresses what is a major cause of social hurt and oppression, the church - whose mission among other things is "to proclaim release to the captives and to let the oppressed go free" - would celebrate.

Such is not necessarily the case. These actions by women are also challenging discriminatory social values which the church has adopted and adapted to. The breaking of the silence by women is exposing the extent to which the church has allowed and condoned violence towards women.

Research on violence within the church indicates that violence is as common within church families and the church community as it is within the broader community. Furthermore, there is a mounting body of evidence to indicate that male church leaders are significantly involved as perpetrators of this violence, both within their personal lives and in a professional capacity. This is shown, not just by the occasional spectacular case which is reported in the media, but by other evidence, both local and overseas.

The Los Angeles Times reported recently that as many as 2,000 cases of sexual abuse by clergy are pending in U.S. courts. As evidence of some of the larger settlements which are taking place, it quoted the Lafayette Diocese of the Catholic Church, which in 1984 paid close to \$20 million in compensation to victims of child abuse and their families in cases involving 21 church workers.

One Presbytery of the Uniting Church in Victoria reported to the church's 1991 state Synod that it was

investigating five complaints of sexual harassment.

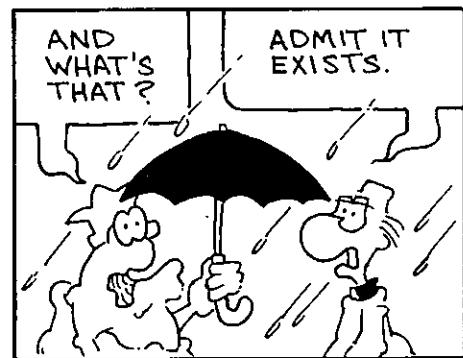
A number of major churches in North America have developed and adopted policies and procedures for defining sexual harassment and assault and dealing with violations. Characteristic of these is the acknowledgement that sexual misconduct by clergy is not simply a matter of individual personal misbehaviour, but an abuse of the power and trust of one's spiritual office, with serious consequences for the victim of the abuse and for the church.

Centre receives three to four call a week . . .

The Centre against Sexual Assault at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, several years ago identified violence within the church community as a major problem which was not being addressed. In association with several churches it established a special task group (Project Anna) to explore the issue, conduct educational workshops within churches, and develop resources. They have been overwhelmed by the requests they have received for information, workshops and counselling. The Centre currently receives between three and four phone calls a week from women reporting sexual assault by male clergy. These calls comprise both women reporting current experiences of sexual assault, and women who have been assaulted in the past and are glad of the chance at last to be able to talk about it.

It is becoming obvious that as the silence around sexual assault within

Pontius' Puddle



the broader community is being broken and precedents for action are being established, Christian women are feeling more empowered to speak out about violence within the church where they had previously simply accepted it and suffered it in silence. Christian women are also beginning to challenge in a way that has not been done before the structures, censures and networks within the church which have protected male perpetrators of violence at the expense of women and children.

The church faces an enormous challenge

Can such evidence be explained and written off, as some leaders suggest, simply as the overreaction of hysterical women or as some sort of "feminist plot" against the church? Can the personal stories of thousands of women within the church continue to be ignored? Is there a dam of sexual assault that is beginning to break and is about to flood the church? This places an enormous challenge before the church, not only to do justice and help in the healing of those who have been badly hurt by assault, but also to guarantee to the society at large that it is a body worthy of respect and trust and that its leaders are worthy of respect and trust.

At the present time churches in Australia appear to be singularly ill-equipped to do this. Churches have been largely sheltered from requirements of the Sex Discrimination Act and unlike other social institutions have not been constrained to define or deal with inappropriate sexual behaviour by its leaders. Hamstrung by divergent views within its ranks about sexuality and sexual morality, few churches have developed clear policies or guidelines on sexual harassment within the church, or have established equitable and effective procedures for dealing with inappropriate behaviour by males in leadership positions.

The absence of such clear, impartial and accountable policies and procedures results in each complaint brought by a woman becoming

embroiled in the morass of personal, theological, social and communal dynamics that operate within local and wider church communities, and results generally in the matter being defined and resolved according to the idiosyncratic exercise of power by individual executives with little previous reflection, experience, training or expertise. This works strongly against an impartial hearing and a just decision being made, exposing the woman in particular to the forces of unacknowledged stereotypes and dominant male power structures. The church has a long history of discrimination against women and of keeping women in their allotted place. Women have been systematically excluded from leadership, theological thought, historical recognition and decision making. Women are still commonly seen as emotionally subjective and prone to hysteria, making them undependable as witnesses. Women's proper role is still widely defined as being submissive to male authority with a view still dominant that their proper character and role are those of nurture, love and support for their men and children.

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Against this, the clergyman inherits all of the social advantages of being male in Australian society. He has additional power through his theological education, his status as a public figure, his position endorsed and guaranteed by the church as the representative of Christ, his privilege of access to people's souls through rights of pastoral relationship and being the "meaning-interpreter" of the faith community, and the largely

unquestioned perception within the church that church leaders always tell the truth.

In a situation where the choice often comes down finally to whether to believe the woman's story or the man's story (very few assaults within the church occur in public!) this difference in social power and perception of credibility becomes decisive.

The dynamics that characterise most church communities in Australia add to the difficulty of dealing well with this issue. The strong drive to make our churches "friendly family" type places to attract new members creates a climate that avoids potentially conflictual issues. The Christian ideals of love and forgiveness fall disproportionately (as they have historically) on women. Confusion about the relationship between justice, discipline and pastoral care and most churches' tendency to suppress conflict and present a happy face all come into play if a woman speaks out and seeks action when she is sexually assaulted within the church community.

Deep spiritual consequences

The experience of sexual assault is a devastating experience, with a wide range of personal consequences that persist for years, even a life-time. When a woman is assaulted by the one whom the church presents as the representative of God, there are deep spiritual consequences described by one writer as equivalent to having one's soul stolen. In order to take action, which is essential for long-term recovery, the woman must first overcome this sense of devastation and betrayal and the strong internal conditioning that somehow she must have been responsible for having been assaulted.

The woman must then summon up courage and determination to expose herself to the fire of resistance and antagonism to hearing bad news and calling into question their "beloved" pastor. The result is that women who speak out about sexual assault within the church generally end up having to leave or being forced out of what has

been their worshipping community. (An area little understood or addressed is the effect - the grief, anger, confusion, guilt - that is felt by congregations when such an incident occurs. Failure to address intentionally this effect can influence and colour the congregation's life for years after.)

Church procedures

If she persists in her attempt to have her experience recognised and dealt with (most women have given up by this time), she must then try to find out and work her way through the procedures by which her church deals with such situations. In doing so, women typically find that the procedures are not widely known, confusing, and frequently exhausting. She is likely to be interviewed and questioned by one or more committees, comprising or dominated by ordained men who have little experience in the dynamics and patterns of sexual assault, who are colleagues of the man she is complaining about, whose ordination is closely linked to protecting the name of the church and supporting ordained colleagues, and whose perception of professional sexual ethics is likely to have been shaped most by cautions given in theological college that male clergy are most in danger of being seduced by unsettled female parishioners.

It is not unusual for women seeking justice from the church simply to become emotionally worn out by the process: telling her story over and over, being examined and cross-examined by different committees, accused of being somehow responsible for being assaulted, fighting through barriers of stereotypes and social expectations, derided by suggestions that if she was a real Christian woman she would not want to destroy a clergyman's career, dealing with people who acknowledge the intellectual reality of sexual assault but fail to believe that this is a real case because they know the person, and driven finally to an unsatisfactory and unjust compromise by church leaders unwilling or unable to confront evil in its own ranks.

In recent years there has been wide social debate and criticism of the way in which people and organisations who hold offices of public trust - police, solicitors, financiers, politicians and medical practitioners - deal with complaints against them. Australians are becoming more aware of the need and the opportunity to hold such people accountable. There is a growing number of complaints against people in such positions of trust, and a growing dissatisfaction with the way in which these complaints are dealt with by internal bodies. There has been a broad social recognition that if a position or body commands and expects social trust, that trust and privilege must be justified and maintained, with complaints dealt with by a process of open and impartial accountability, not by in-house processes that suggest secret self-protection. The church is becoming drawn into that same social expectation, though it should not be seen as a new nor unrealistic expectation for the church. There are indications already that failure to respond to the expectation is having negative ramifications for the church.

Action is often taken in secret

If action is taken against an offending church leader, it tends to be done in secret, discreetly removing the offender without any acknowledgement, even to the congregation from which the minister was removed. While confidentiality is essential for some valid reasons, uncritical confidentiality often serves to protect the church and perpetrators at the expense of those who are victimised. Silence gives the impression that the church does not have a problem in this area. This isolates women who experience assault by making them think they are the only one this has happened to. It prevents other male leaders from acknowledging a problem within themselves and doing something about it. It deters the development of research and resources for dealing with the problem, and it fails to present an honest face of repentance and forgiveness by

the church to the wider society. The church holds a position of social trust, not as a consumer organisation but as a divine trust and as an embodiment of the gospel of God's grace. How much more urgent is it that we act quickly to address this issue in a way that "joins informed compassion with a process that seeks justice and restoration." As the Presbyterian Church (USA) notes in the Introduction to its "Policy and procedures on sexual misconduct":

"We are facing a crisis terrible in its proportions and implications... In a context of trust it is hard to recognise abusive behaviour because we do not expect to see it. In fact, as in families where incest occurs, we may find that we have chosen not to see. When that occurs we, too, are complicit. Now that our consciousness is raised, we are responsible for appropriate intervention and prevention... The integrity of the denomination and its ministry is at stake."



Peter Horsfield is editor of Australian Ministry and Dean of Uniting Church Theological Hall, Melbourne.

A documented and footnoted copy of this article is available by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: Rev. Dr. Peter Horsfield, Australian Ministry, Ormond College, Parkville, 3052.
