

The Other Pandemic – Family Abuse and Violence

At a recent meeting of the Presbytery of Westminster, the Presbytery agreed to distribute this report from the Community Engagement Committee (CEC) to the Sessions within its bounds with the request that they make their congregation aware of this issue and encourage their members to take actions such as those suggested in the report.

The CEC understands that part of our mandate is to raise awareness in congregations of emerging issues of mission and social justice, and provide them with ideas and resources that will assist them in responding to those issues.

In keeping with that responsibility, we bring to the attention of presbytery another pandemic that is neither new nor unprecedented. It has been with us for decades but has been largely ignored in both provincial and federal government policies, laws, budgets and programs. It is the pandemic of domestic abuse and family violence. However, one positive (but troublesome) result of the Covid-19 pandemic is that this issue has been given more exposure because of the increase in horribly abusive situations that have resulted from women being confined to their homes with abusive partners for long periods of time.

As of May 22nd, at least 10 Canadian women have been killed by intimate partners over just the past few months. The guilty are often men who have already been reported to police, but merely given a restraining order and then set free by judges who do not seem to be aware of the fact that they are sending a potential killer back into a violent situation. Because their partner has dared to report their behaviour, or has attempted to flee, the anger of these abusive partners can rise to a level of fury that might lead to homicide.

Meanwhile, a CBC investigation last year found that in Canada more than 600 women and children were being turned away from shelters every day because there are no spaces available. On May 22nd, Gary Mason wrote in the Globe and Mail, “Just think about that number. It represents thousands and thousands of women ...who need to get out of their homes because their lives may be in danger. So what do they do? Many have no option but to stay in the volatile, life-threatening situation they are trying to flee. In a country as rich as ours, that is shameful.”

The pittance that the federal government has recently allocated to the 550 shelters across the country (about \$32,000 per shelter) might help shelters adapt to physical distancing measures and provide some PPE's, but it will do nothing to increase spaces for terrified and desperate women and children who are fleeing horribly abusive situations.

And even more alarming is that a high percentage of domestic abuse “incidents” are not even reported to authorities, partly because the women are terrified of what their partner might do next, and partly because they have no confidence that the police or the legal system will do

anything that will help them out of their dangerous situation, and indeed might even make it worse.

This pandemic is not an issue confined to families at the poorer levels of society or to certain immigrant families. It infects all levels of society, regardless of economic status, colour, race or religion. And there are many of us who have family members, friends or church members who have suffered from it.

So, what do we do?

First, we can take this pandemic seriously, learn more about it and seek ways to address it.

Second, we can offer pastoral support to those who are caught in this trap of abuse, but not with a prayer and a (destructive) word of advice to “go home, try to make peace and be a better wife.”

No, we in the church need to educate ourselves (1) on what lies behind the abusive behaviour of intimate partners, (2) on how to identify the Cycle of Abuse, and (3) on the resources available to women who are experiencing abuse.

There are agencies which are working tirelessly to assist the women and children who desperately need help, and we need to support them. And we need to advocate on behalf of these families by raising this shameful pandemic with our provincial and federal MLAs and MPs, as well as with government justice ministers and health ministers, and by demanding significant action.

In this season of Pentecost, we remember that one of the names for the Holy Spirit is “Advocate”. As the Spirit advocates on our behalf in our times of need, so **we can advocate on behalf of these women and children** in their time of need. See below for information on how to contact your MLAs and MPs.

To assist readers in following through on this issue:

Read this book and give it to a woman experiencing abuse: When Love Hurts - A Woman’s Guide to Understanding Abuse in Relationship, by Jill Cory and Karen McAndless-Davis, Revised edition 2016, Penguin Random House. Available through bookstores and most libraries.

Direct women to www.WhenLoveHurts.ca for helpful articles and videos.

Write to your MLA and MP, with copies to appropriate government ministers. A simple letter which includes the above material, requesting their action on this pandemic of family violence, is all you need. Here are your contacts:

List of Current Members of the BC Legislative Assembly (MLA): <https://www.leg.bc.ca/learn-about-us/members>

List of Current Members of Parliament(MP): <https://www.ourcommons.ca/members/en/search>
Government of Canada - Minister of Justice (Honourable David Lametti):
<https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/> Government of Canada - Minister of Health (Honourable Patty
Hajdu):
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/corporate/contact-us.html>

Make a financial gift to your local Transition House, or to R.E.S.P.E.C.T. Society for Women. R.E.S.P.E.C.T. stands for Respecting Every Sister Providing Encouragement in Critical Times. It is a small non-profit that provides support, resources and education to women experiencing abuse from a partner. Money collected during the Covid Pandemic will fund virtual support groups and one-on-one crisis counselling for women experiencing abuse from a partner. Donations can be made online at: [Respect4Women.org](https://www.respect4women.org) (click on “how you can help”) or mail to: R.E.S.P.E.C.T. Society for Women 2313 Marine Drive, New Westminster BC.