

NOTICE OF MOTION 27. DOMESTIC & FAMILY VIOLENCE

Introduction

This motion is intended to start with a commitment not just to listen, but to hear the voices who have, or are currently, experiencing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). It is a profound problem within our wider community. It is no less a serious problem within our Anglican Church (and undoubtedly most other churches as well). More than data, trends and numbers (and they are alarming enough), this is about people – although some male victims have disturbing stories to tell, the majority of such victims (especially at the physically violent end of things) are women.

In the wake of the #MeToo movement, the emergence of #ChurchToo resulted in stories of abuse in religious contexts. Awareness of domestic violence across our society across all social classes and demographics has similarly seen a number of brave women give voice to their experience of intimate partner violence that exhibited some distinctive spiritual and faith-related dynamics.

Background

Cognizant of such stories, General Synod 2017 resolved to establish a National Anglican Family Violence Working Group, tasked with establishing a research project to investigate further into the nature of such abuse, including indicative prevalence data and experience-related case studies.

Representation on this Working Group came from across the National Church, reflecting a range of ecclesial traditions and theological perspectives. An overview and collection of the reports of the Working Group may be found here: <https://anglican.org.au/our-work/family-violence/>

The resulting report makes for disturbing reading. As is true of all such projects (short of the National Census), the Report does not claim to have surveyed the entire Anglican Church population or drawn from random sampling ('probability sampling'). Drawing from methodological experience in the UK and adopting Australian Standards for research of this nature, three inter-related but specific methods and instruments were adopted (Prevalence, Clergy and Lay Leader responses, and Experience case-studies.) The Report is very measured in what it is and what it is not identifying and claiming, and equally very professional in the use of analytical tools that identify trends and comparative data with other findings indicative of the general public.

In brief, we as members of the Anglican Church of Australia need to hear and own the fact that we are not immune from the incidence of IPV, and such appears to occur as much, and on some measures more than, in the wider community. The 'more than' element needs further investigation but is likely to indicate areas of particular vulnerability to forms of abuse that relate to spiritual and faith-based power and coercion dynamics that are especially associated with religious communities and institutions.

A key finding of the Report is that: 'The prevalence of intimate partner violence among Anglicans was the same or higher than in the wider Australian community. Different measures of prevalence of domestic violence across different domains, including physical, sexual, financial, psychological and spiritual abuse, were at the same level or higher among Anglicans when compared to the wider Australian community' (page 22).

This motion is not about the Research Project, which essentially confirmed that the very personal stories and experience of those speaking out about domestic and family violence are not isolated. We have a problem—a serious problem—we need not only to acknowledge, but to commit ourselves to do better. Much better.

Standing Committee of General Synod received the report from the Family Violence Working Group and had extensive and very helpful interaction with the Chief Investigator: Dr Ruth Powell, PhD, BA, Director, NCLS Research and Associate Professor, Charles Sturt University. Working with proposals from the Working Group, Standing Committee further developed and released the ‘Ten Commitments’ for the engagement of dioceses, which feature as the focus of our considerations within our own Diocesan Synod.

A couple of frequently asked questions:

1. Is this a gender thing? Don’t men also experience intimate partner violence (IPV)?

While instances of males being victims of IPV are certainly evident and not to be diminished (indeed, more work is needed in this area as well), it is clear that Australia as a whole has a disturbingly high rate of such violence against women. Core values of hearing and being proactive in the form of the Ten Commitments apply equally, yet we must engage with the hard truth that prevalence of IPV against women bears particular characteristics and dynamics. The NAFVP report summarises its findings in this table (with reference to ‘lifetime prevalence’):

Table 2: Lifetime prevalence of IPV and spiritual abuse victimisation in the general public and Anglican samples by gender

	General Public			Anglican		
	Female %	Male %	Total %	Female %	Male %	Total %
IPV – any (15 behaviours)	44	31	38	52	33	44
Physical violence – any (7 behaviours)	31	19	25	39	23	32
Sexual violence – any (2 behaviours)	18	7	13	23	5	15
Harassment – any (2 behaviours)	20	12	16	30	15	23
Spiritual abuse – any (6 behaviours)	11	10	10	13	6	10

Source: 2019 NAFVP Prevalence Study. Items are from the Composite Abuse Scale Short Form (CAS-SF), with additional items about spiritual abuse. Percentages are based on those who indicated they had ever been in an adult intimate relationship (general population n = 949; Anglican n = 765).

Women do face particular vulnerabilities, including within the church. They are not alone in this (so do children, indigenous people, refugees, those with disabilities and the aged etc.) We are called in the gospel to have a special concern for the vulnerable—to be especially proactive and attentive in this regard.

2. Do these findings relate to specific sectors of the church or theological persuasions?

This is an ‘all-of-church’ problem. Although differing institutional forms, traditions and theological stances may have particular areas of vulnerability and features that may be exploited or abused, the experience of abuse is reported across the National Church and our response needs to be approached similarly on an ‘all-of-church’ basis. We ALL have our blind spots and the Ten Commitments apply regardless of tradition, ecclesiology or theology.