



Naming Domestic Violence

I've put this draft paper together because we cannot be silent about the reality of Domestic Violence (DV) in our wider community and within the church. When it comes to DV there will be a variety of experiences. Some of us are relatively naive. Some of us are permanently scarred by its terrible intrusion into our lives. Some of us will feel that addressing the topic is simply bowing to the wind of the news media. Some of you might feel that direct speech on this topic is distressingly overdue.

It is true that in the past churches have not always provided helpful support to DV victims - whether by ill-advising women to stay, or by failing to be explicit in rejecting so-called 'justifications' for DV from from key texts. These failures must be turned around so that in a DV soaked society the church can rightly be expected to be a place of safety and support.

May God have mercy on us all as we deal with the insidious evil of Domestic Violence in our community and within our churches. I pray that in some small part by God's grace this document may begin to educate and assist NewLife to become a safer place that not only extols the virtues of God's glorious gift of marriage but also supports those whose experiences fall so terribly short.

Stuart Starr,
Lead Pastor (0438 093 412)

If you need support the pastoral staff are ready to listen. Additionally, you can find counselling services by calling **1800 65 64 63**, or if you are in immediate danger **000**.

What is Domestic Violence?

When it comes to DV the prevailing view seems to be that without a black eye no domestic violence has occurred. This view is false and can be a contributor to victims believing that they must stay in what are actually DV households until such a physical line is crossed. In the past a limited understanding has likely hindered the support of victims outside the home and led to unhelpful statements from clergy (among others) when it came to counselling women to stay or leave. It has undoubtedly contributed to the failure to listen to women taking the courageous step to disclose abuse.

The Australian Department of Human Services offers this definition of DV:

"Family and domestic violence is conduct that is violent, threatening, coercive, controlling or intended to cause the family or household member to be fearful. It can include:

- *physical, verbal, emotional, sexual or psychological abuse*
- *neglect*
- *financial abuse*
- *stalking*
- *harm to an animal or property*
- *restricting your spiritual or cultural participation, or*
- *exposing children to the effects of these behaviours*

*Family and domestic violence can affect anyone. It can impact all types of relationships..
..People affected by family and domestic violence may live in fear for themselves and their family, even when they have left a violent relationship."*

This definition includes physical violence and expands to show that many other forms of intimate partner behaviour should rightly be considered DV. Reading this list may mean that there is some personal need for reassessment of what constitutes DV. The various kinds of DV mentioned above are explained on the very helpful White Ribbon Website:

<https://www.whiteribbon.org.au/understand-domestic-violence/types-of-abuse/>

You may be shocked to learn that **one in four** Australian women has experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner and on average **one woman a week** is killed by a partner or former partner.

How could we begin to respond?

The more I've read on this topic the more I've been humbled by the sheer scale of the pain and societal impact and the more I've been overwhelmed by my lack of expertise in the face of it all. Having had the issue brought front and centre by pastoral conversations, training from the Diocese, and more recently by news media stories, I'm determined not to let this shortfall mean that NewLife will remain silent. It does however temper the strength of these suggested responses. In that light, please see these three next steps as just that - the start of a process of moving us towards becoming a safer place for disclosure of DV and one that is intentional about naming DV for what it is - unjustifiable abuse of power. Please join me in praying that God will aid us as we begin, and sustain us as we continue. I suggest we can begin to respond to DV in the church by:

1. Learning to listen

In the literature the overwhelming need of women who have suffered DV is to be listened to when they take the brave decision to disclose abuse. As a leadership team we commit to listening. You must hear from us that it is not your fault. You are not to blame. Your safety is important. We want to help you to be safe. As congregation members this article has five very practical recommendations for how you can help and care:

<http://www.fixinghereyes.org/single-post/2016/11/09/5-ways-to-support-someone-experiencing-Family-Violence>

2. Learning to refer

We won't be able to 'fix' occurrences of DV and we must resist the urge to do so. Learning how to access support services and refer on is a key step in the list mentioned above and comes with the warning not to overstep our knowledge and abilities. You can refer women to **1800 737 732** and men to **1300 789 978**. Additionally, you can find local help in the Macarthur region here: <https://www.dvhelp.org.au>

3. Addressing the problem of inadvertent messages

Inadvertent messages are the ones we send without intending to. Here are four we need to address:

a) "It's all good"

One of the distinctives of NewLife is the prevalence of families. It's a great joy to see families of all ages gathering together to worship and follow Jesus. And yet, as we all try to present our "Sunday Best" it's possible to draw the conclusion that *everyone* has *everything* together *all the time*. That's patently untrue - our theology reminds us that because of sin there are *no* perfect families - whatever the impression.

b) "Suffering can equal staying"

As we speak from the front about suffering for the sake of the Gospel it's possible to conclude that this principle should be applied to other areas of suffering too. By speaking about the very real need to put up with hardship for the mission we can inadvertently send the message that women should persevere in DV households. Such passages do not address DV and thus cannot endorse staying in danger.

c) "Snippets are sufficient"

Research by Dr Steven Tracey indicates that the biggest at-risk group for DV within the church is among fringe church attenders. As we speak on the beautiful and fraught topics of marriage, relationships, and leadership, those who attend infrequently can gather an arsenal of soundbites to 'justify' positions that we in *no way* endorse. In this context it becomes imperative that we are explicit in rebutting DV 'justifications' *every time* we teach on passages like Ephesians 5 and others like it.

d) "Brokenness has no place"

We can aid the development of a culture of care and accountability at NewLife by seeking to encourage openness and transparency in our Sunday gatherings and especially within our LifeGroups and one-to-one meetings. By deliberately seeking to be authentic as we gather we weaken the power of the "Sunday Best" illusion and establish a culture that affirms we are all broken people in need of Jesus.

You can continue to broaden your understanding of DV here: <https://www.whiteribbon.org.au>