

## **THE PRONOUNCEMENT ON VIOLENCE IN RELATION TO WOMEN**

### **I. Summary**

As Christians, believing in the sacredness of God's creation and in the equality of women and men, we are called to speak out against the physical and/ or sexual abuse of any person. Because women are the primary victims of domestic violence, rape, and sexual harassment, this Pronouncement calls for the United Church of Christ to increase its understanding of violence against women, provide ministry to victims and abusers, and work against violence in our society.

### **II. Origin**

The Thirteenth General Synod called upon the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries to draft a major pronouncement and proposals for action on Violence Against Women for consideration of the Fourteenth General Synod, and to be in consultation with the Coordinating Center for Women, the Office for Church in Society, and the Commission for Racial Justice in preparation of the Pronouncement and proposals.

### **III. Background and Rationale**

Violence is widespread in American homes and society. A high percentage of that violence is directed against women and children. Every five minutes a forcible rape occurs in this country. Every 30 seconds a child is abused. One-tenth of these cases are sexual abuse. In 85 percent of these latter cases, the abuser is a family member or acquaintance of the child. Every 60 seconds, a case of physical spousal assault will be reported to the police. If a woman, you have a one in six chance of being raped. If a married woman, you have a one in seven chance of being raped by your husband, and the law of your state may offer you no protection at all. If a married woman or if a woman cohabiting with a male, you have a one in two chance of being physically battered.

This abuse goes on each hour of the day, each day of the week, each week of the year. To compound the horror, recent research suggests that today's abused will be tomorrow's abuser. Thus the problem becomes generational, reminding us of the Biblical phrase "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." This Pronouncement does not address violence generally in our society, does not focus on violence against women *and* men, and does not survey violence as the "human condition." This is by intention because women and girls of all ages are the primary victims of "domestic" or "family" violence, just as they are the primary victims of rape, sexual abuse, or sexual harassment.

"Domestic" or "family" violence includes spouse battering, child abuse or neglect, and elder abuse (which the media has christened "granny bopping" because elderly women are the most frequent victims), as well as marital rape and incest. It can even include violence carried to the extreme of murder. But whatever its kind, domestic violence injures women and children more frequently and more seriously than it does men.

Dr. Murray Straus, America's foremost authority on domestic violence, asserts that almost 30 percent of all married couples admit to violent behavior. Assuming that many hesitate to admit their acts, he estimates that 50-60 percent of all married couples experience serious forms of violence at some time. A similar or even higher level of violence may occur among cohabiting or courting couples.

Violent behavior in the home includes: throwing things; pushing or shoving; slapping, kicking, or biting; hitting with a fist; beating; threatening with a knife or a gun; slashing or shooting. Only the last several actions are considered in Straus's statistics. It is a sad commentary on American families that many of these actions are often viewed as "normal" in families. Violent behavior also includes sexual assault, which may occur either within or outside the family unit.

Both men and women use violence, but the violence male usually does far more damage than does the violent woman. Abusive men are particularly likely to attack a woman when she is pregnant, thereby intensifying the damage. But individuals need not resort to constant violence: one episode can "establish a the balance of power within the relationship for a lifetime."

Violence in the home inflicts suffering on children and the elderly as well. Over one million cases of child abuse are reported each year; many thousands undoubtedly go unreported. Two thousand children die each year from physical abuse. In the home, as in society at large, over 80 percent of all victims of sexual abuse are girls. With more mothers cohabitating with men who are not the fathers of their children, sexual abuse of the woman's daughters by the live-in male is increasing. But incest is also widespread, the major incestuous abuser of girls being the child's father or stepfather. Finally one million persons 65 or older are abused physically or sexually each year. Women, who outlive men, are the primary victims.

Violence, power, or the lack of power are closely related. Force is socially accepted as an indicator of power, and the physically weak can easily be victimized by the physically stronger. Male violence against women and children has often been seen as legitimate within families, since force demonstrates man's traditional role-often thought to be biblically based -as head of the family.

Women who remain in a violent relationship do so for many reasons, often because they themselves accept the familiar sexual stereotypes which declare that the male should be dominant and the female subordinate. Women who are economically dependent are particularly likely to accept physical, sexual, or psychological abuse from husbands or partners, particularly if they have children dependent upon them. Tragically, they may then prove that they possess at least some power by using force on their children. Abusive parents often believe that parents who spare the rod, spoil the child. In the light of the violence that flourishes within families, the myth of the home as a place of unchanging love, support, and peace needs re-examination, as do the sexual stereotypes and social inequalities which disadvantage women in their relationships with men.

The cultural stereotype of Woman as the daughter of Eve, source of all humankind's woes, lives on for many women in their families, their culture, and often their religious institutions. Many battered women report turning to a pastor for help, only to be asked, "What did you do to make him beat you up?" After such a response, few turn to the church again.

Our culture too exploits violence. Our favorite forms of entertainment are often fantasies of violence, many of which depend upon the depiction or threat of violence against women, usually by one or more men. Fairy tales and television shows demonstrate the close association between eroticism and the victimization of women: the damsel in distress is sexually exciting. A multi-million dollar pornography industry dramatizes indignities, brutalization, and torture inflicted upon women, once again by men. Similarly, we sell millions of dollars worth of products through advertisements using female bodies, often in attitudes of adoration, passivity, or actual subjugation toward attractive men. This distortion of human love violates both male and female personhood.

Violence toward women includes rape, both at home and in society. One hundred seventy-five thousand rapes of women, girls, and female infants (as young as six months) are reported yearly. For every rape recorded, the FBI estimates another ten are not. Women find their words, actions, manner of dress, freedom of movement, and choice of living quarters influenced by their constant awareness that they are always vulnerable to sexual attack. Few who have not experienced this habit of mind can comprehend it fully, and the distortions of personhood or behavior produced in women and girls-often at a very early age - cannot be underestimated. In addition, over 70 percent of all women report being victimized by sexual harassment in the workplace - an experience which is again often related to their customary powerlessness in relation to men in positions of authority. Economically, politically, and culturally, women have not experienced the equality to which God has created them. Much of our culture itself does violence to girls and women, damaging their bodies and their self-esteem with effects which may be lifelong. Just as one instance of domestic violence can establish the balance of family power for a lifetime, so constant reminders of women's powerlessness in society reinforce the dependency which subjects them to violence. Even expressions of Christianity have perpetuated these sexual inequalities in the family forms they have established and upheld, insisting on a hierarchy of male over female and adults over children.

The close association between women and violence is our heritage. But violence begets violence, in an almost unending chain. It is for us, as a church, to rectify this injustice by acting to end this evil.

#### **IV. Biblical and Theological Rationale**

The profound significance of the sacredness of God's creation in human beings underlies any theological response to physical and sexual violence. God's creation includes women, created equally in God's own image and equally deserving of the abundant life promised in the Gospels. To affirm, as some have done, that the Bible intends women for subordination and suffering, is to distort and misunderstand the thrust of our heritage. Believing in the goodness and equality of men and women in the created order, we must testify that any

unnecessary suffering-particularly the physical or sexual abuse of any person-is a blasphemy before God and a grave injustice in our midst.

The psalmists spoke strong words to condemn violence between intimates:

My heart is in anguish within me,  
the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me,  
and horror overwhelms me ...  
It is not an adversary who deals insolently with me-  
then I could hide from him. But it is you, my equal,  
my companion, my familiar friend.  
We used to hold sweet converse together;  
within God's house we walked in fellowship.  
(Psalms, 55:4,5, 12-14)

Similarly, the prophets repeatedly condemned the exploitation or use of violence against women and children, when they lamented that "Women are ravished in Zion..." (Lam. 5.9), or that evil persons "have ripped up women with children in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border" (Amos, 1.13), or that-"the women of my people you drive out of their pleasant houses; from their young children you take away my glory forever" (Micah, 2.9). Such suffering is clearly as an evil in their eyes.

The Old Testament custom of providing for the widow, orphan and stranger was intended to protect the most vulnerable in Hebrew society, who had lost the protection of a family unit. In our day, the most vulnerable persons in our society are still most frequently and most damagingly the victims of violence: The institutional and attitudinal response to and the delivery of services to certain groups in our society is inferior to the response given to others, and extends the agony of the victims.

Unfortunately, the Scripture and tradition of the Christian faith are a double-edged sword for women and children. On the one hand, acts of violence against them are condemned as sinful. But on the other, women and children were regarded as property-at the mercy of husband or father. Hence, stories of the rape, mutilation, and murder of women or children are common in Scripture, and often leave the impression that these are normal acts. The most frequently expressed Old Testament attitude related to violence against women is concern for the degree of damage in terms of their property value. Thus our religious tradition, with its patriarchal bias, often seems an ambiguous resource for addressing the relationship of violence and women.

We are people of the New Covenant: Jesus' teachings call us to oppose violence and abuse at all levels of our life. His attitude toward women and children was one of compassion and caring, and his outrage at the abuse he saw in the Temple surely parallels our outrage at violence against the most sacred of temples, the human person.

We are called by our Baptism to respond to that abuse, for by Baptism, we are One in the body of Christ. When any member of that body is abused or violated, the whole of Christ's

body is injured. As members of that body, we are called to seek justice, but not revenge, to righteous anger, but not blind rage. We are called to works of compassion, justice, and mercy; we are called to pastoral and prophetic ministries in response to victims of violence. We are called as a Church to be a sanctuary for those who are abused.

Jesus foreshadowed this ministry in his story of the Good Samaritan, who cared for one victimized by the violence of his society. Among us today the victims of violence and abuse lie by the side of the road: beaten, humiliated, bruised, and exploited. Too often the Church, like the Priest and the Levite of the Gospel story, has passed by on the other side. We are called to be the Samaritan-to support, shelter, love, and heal those who are victims of violence of this \Alarid.

#### **V. Statement of Christian Conviction**

We are people of the New Covenant. We are all members of the human family of God and each of us should be loved and affirmed as children of God with the same inalienable rights to justice and equality in life. In a violent world, we have declared peace and family life to be priorities for our church. But there can be no peace in the world or in families while violence against women continues.

Therefore, the Fourteenth General Synod calls upon its clergy, laity, and seminarians to educate themselves and others on issues of violence against women, to be advocates for equality between women and men, and to work for the elimination of violence against women.

#### **PROPOSAL FOR ACTION RELATED TO THE PRONOUNCEMENT ON VIOLENCE IN RELATION TO WOMEN**

WHEREAS, the Fourteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ has adopted the Pronouncement on Violence Against Women and since Peace and Family Life are priorities of the United Church of Christ; we experience increasing awareness of violence against women, children and the elderly, and we are called as Christians to be Good Samaritans, to take action on behalf of those who suffer.

THEREFORE, the Fourteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon all United Church of Christ churches, Conferences, national Instrumentalities, and other bodies:

- to address the issue of violence against women, by raising consciousness among clergy and laity;
- to work with ecumenical and secular agencies to develop and support hot lines, rape crisis centers, shelters for abused women and children, and pro- grams for abusers;
- to work with schools, churches and hospitals to establish programs to educate prospective parents, parents, and other caretakers of children in the realities of child development, parenting skills, and human sexuality:

- to advocate legislation to protect abused persons and to bring abusers into rehabilitation programs, seeking all prompt, compassionate and just legal remedies for this abuse.
- the local United Church of Christ churches to minister to the victims of violence and to their abusers and to develop and support, in cooperation with other agencies, shelters for victims and programs for abusers:
- the Conferences to advocate on the state level for legislation that addresses the issues of violence against women and to advocate for shelters for victims and programs for abusers:
- the Board for Homeland Ministries to recommend and / or publish materials that can be used in churches to help people of all ages understand and oppose sexual and domestic violence, and to examine critically those factors which perpetuate sexual stereotypes destructive to both female and male personhood and which lead to violence both in families and society; and to encourage schools to examine these issues;
- the Coordinating Center for Women to inform the churches of programs and resources that will increase their understanding of violence against women and coordinate work among Instrumentalities and other bodies in relation to this issue;
- the Office for Church and Society, in collaboration with Instrumentalities, Conferences, and churches, to advocate for legislation that addresses the issues of violence against women;
- the Commission for Racial Justice to address the relationship of cultural, psychosocial, economic, and racial conditions to violence against women and children of color;
- the Office of Communication to publish articles and reports that will inform the churches and community about the issues of violence against women, and to address directly images of violence against women in the media;
- the Board for World Ministries to search out reports concerning the relationship between violence against women and the global exploitation and subordination of women and children and to make the churches aware of that information;
- the Office for Church Life and Leadership to provide pastors with opportunities and resources to enable them to understand issues of violence against women and to initiate a dialogue with our closely related seminaries that would stimulate theological work and encourage preparation of students concerning the issue;
- the Stewardship Council to include in its interpretation of the mission of the whole Church, the Church's work in relation to Violence Against Women.