

# Identifying Abuse of Power in Relationships

## SIN EXPOSED

We have seen that relationships are crucial for human beings. Our very need for love, and the importance to us of those with whom we are in relationship, constitute an inherent power, for good or evil, that others who are in relationship with us can exercise towards us, and we towards them. We have also begun to see the potential for massive damage that can be done in people's lives when this power, and this trust, is abused.

Sin and deception go hand in hand. The originator of our evil, identified in the Bible as 'that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' (Rev. 12:9), is called by Jesus 'a liar and the father of lies' (John 8:44). Abusive relationships are commonly cloaked in deception and fear of exposure, often under most reputable, even attractive, external appearances. This can be a sore trial and a vexed confusion for those who are taken in by these outward appearances.

Such is the power of the truth of God, however, that Jesus said:

... nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light (Luke 8:17).

## *Power in Relationships*

This, in spite of the fact that ‘all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed’ (John 3:20). Paul the apostle, speaking from this side of Christ’s resurrection from death, says: ‘everything exposed by the light becomes visible’ (Eph. 5:13). The writer to the Hebrews concurs:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account (Heb. 4:12–13).

Anglican Christians have regularly prayed:

Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden:  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Little wonder, then, that widespread instances of the abuse of power in relationships, both inside and outside the church, are coming to light in our time. Once they have been exposed—even though they remained well hidden before—hopefully there will be an awareness and a wisdom that will help to guard against further abuse, and the gullibility or negligence that allows and fosters it.

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘Collect for Purity’ or ‘Prayer of Preparation’, with which the Anglican service of Holy Communion begins; see The Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Broughton Books, 1995, p. 119.

## *Identifying Abuse of Power in Relationships*

We cite here four instances of the abuse of power in relationships, in the interests of this clear identification and needful correction: domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, rape and sexual assault, and bullying.

### **Domestic Violence**

Violence in the home between spouses or partners has been prevalent in many societies, including our own. ‘While domestic violence occurs across all types of relationships, 95–98% is male to female violence.’<sup>2</sup> According to a Personal Safety Survey made by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2005, ‘5.8 per cent of women in Australia had experienced violence in the 12 month period preceding the survey’.<sup>3</sup> Other studies show that ‘up to one third of all women will be the victim of domestic violence at some period in her life’.<sup>4</sup>

Domestic violence can include physical violence (physical and sexual abuse, object damage), emotional violence (threats and intimidation, put-downs), social abuse (isolation, smothering, put-downs in company), economic abuse, and spiritual abuse—and results in injury, a sense of guilt and failure, fear, and humiliation.<sup>5</sup> Effects on children who witness domestic violence can be damaging and long-lasting, including fearfulness, depression, frustration, sadness, guilt, helplessness, withdrawn or aggressive behaviour, relationship inability, and poor school performance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Domestic Violence: Handbook for Clergy and Pastoral Workers*, Joint Churches Domestic Violence Prevention Programme, c/- Anglican Community Services, North Adelaide, 1995, Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> <[www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/Dom\\_violence.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/Dom_violence.htm)> (accessed 23rd October 2007).

<sup>4</sup> *Domestic Violence*, Introduction.

<sup>5</sup> *Domestic Violence*, pp. 1, 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Domestic Violence*, p. 15.

### **Child Abuse and Neglect**

Child abuse happens in the community every day. It can take the forms of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, and the failure to provide for a child's basic needs. It issues in a range of emotions, including a sense of guilt, shame, confusion and fear.<sup>7</sup>

Particularly damaging in the long term is child sexual abuse. A recent study in Australia has found that one in three women and one in six men are subjected to some form of 'unwanted sexual experience' during childhood. The incidence among men may be under-reported. In at least 10% of all cases for both men and women, this abuse was considered severe.<sup>8</sup> This can lead to mental health and personality disorders, such as anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, disordered eating, and suicidal behaviour.<sup>9</sup>

The grooming behaviour of many perpetrators focuses on building a relationship of friendship and trust with children and their parents, and their abusive actions are a betrayal of trust and a misuse of power,<sup>10</sup> taking advantage of the imbalances of age, size, physical strength, status, knowledge, experience, and cognitive and emotional development.<sup>11</sup> Most child sexual abuse takes place within families.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Child-Safe Environments: Reporting Child Abuse & Neglect: Participant Workbook*, Government of South Australia, Department for Families and Communities, April 2006, pp. 4, 19–20, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Fergusson & Mullen (1999), cited in *Recognise and Respond to Disclosures of Rape and Sexual Assault*, Yarrow Place Rape and Sexual Assault Service, North Adelaide; course attended in 2006, notes p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Yarrow Place, 2006, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Anglican Diocese of Adelaide Training, 'Being Aware of the Grooming Perpetrator', *Safety and Screening/Version2/ April 2006*.

<sup>11</sup> 'Power, Authority, Trust & Respect', Yarrow Place, 2006, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> 'Perpetrators of Sexual Abuse', Yarrow Place, 2006, p. 10.

### **Rape and Sexual Assault**

‘Rape is not primarily a sexual act; rather it is a crime of violence, terror and humiliation . . . Rape victims are violated and rendered helpless by someone else’s need for power and control.’ More than one in every thousand persons in South Australia suffered rape and sexual assault in 2002. In 63% of cases, the perpetrator was already known to the victim<sup>13</sup>—it was the abuse of an already existing relationship.

This issues in a wide range of damaging emotional, psychological, physical, social, and ideological/spiritual effects,<sup>14</sup> that are deep-seated and can be long-lasting.

### **Bullying**

Bullying occurs not just in the schoolyard, but also in the workplace. According to British research: ‘Up to one in four people are currently being bullied at work . . . an estimated 18.9m working days are lost annually. Costs to individual companies are between 8–10% of annual profits, plus the threat of costly litigation.’<sup>15</sup> Definitions of bullying include one or more of these incidents happening at least weekly:

- being humiliated in front of colleagues
- being undermined
- regularly being the subject of gossip
- constant public or private criticism

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Understanding Rape’, ‘Prevalence of Rape and Sexual Assault’, Yarrow Place, 2006, pp. 12, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Yarrow Place, 2006, pp. 16–18.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Lee, lecturer and tutor in social psychology, University of Oxford, ‘Bullying in the Church’, a letter to the *Church Times*, 22nd June 2007, used by permission. She cites Andrea Adams Trust (2006), *Ban Bullying at Work Day 7th November 2006: A Minute for Your Thoughts* (<[www.banbullyingatwork.com](http://www.banbullyingatwork.com)> accessed 6th November 2006; also <[www.andreaadamstrust.org](http://www.andreaadamstrust.org)>).

## *Power in Relationships*

- having opinions or comments ignored
- having responsibilities removed
- being shouted at
- being overloaded with work with unreasonable deadlines.<sup>16</sup>

In some settings, bullying can become a cultural norm. Bullies want to make themselves feel more powerful, sometimes out of a sense of personal inadequacy. They can be motivated by anxiety, fear, ignorance, jealousy or misunderstanding.<sup>17</sup> Bullying typically happens in private, and thrives on secrecy and silence. ‘When confidentiality prevents targets from seeking help, it becomes abusive.’<sup>18</sup>

Bullying can be very disempowering and disabling. Those experiencing bullying may:

- be less productive
- be less confident in work
- feel scared, stressed, anxious or depressed
- have other areas of life affected
- want to stay away from work
- feel unable to trust superiors and colleagues
- lack confidence and self-esteem in self and work
- have physical symptoms of stress such as headaches, backaches, sleep problems
- feel isolated
- begin to believe what the bullies are saying
- feel unsafe.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Anne Lee, ‘Bullying in the Church’.

<sup>17</sup> The Anglican Diocese of Adelaide, Safer Ministry Education, Power and Trust Seminar, 2006, version 1, pp. 4–5.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Lee, ‘Bullying in the Church’.

<sup>19</sup> Anglican Diocese of Adelaide, ‘Bullying’, p. 5.

## *Identifying Abuse of Power in Relationships*

Bullying can occur in the church. ‘Lay people, church officers, church workers or clergy can behave abusively to other lay or ordained people . . . One third of the cases before the Director of Professional Standards in the Diocese of Melbourne, Australia, are allegations of bullying.’<sup>20</sup> Paul the apostle identified such behaviour occurring in the church at Corinth: ‘you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face’ (2 Cor. 11:20). With irony, Paul dissociated himself from any such action, or submission to any such treatment, when he said, ‘To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!’ (2 Cor. 11:21). Anne Lee comments: ‘An organisation which allows bullying behaviour to continue unchecked is compromised in proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Whenever a church or church organisation refuses to answer questions, punishes those who express concerns, abuses confidentiality, covers up, coerces, threatens or deceives, gospel values are being directly undermined.’<sup>21</sup>

### **JUDGEMENT IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD**

Disturbing as it is to speak of these things, we may be even more upended at the discovery that these things happen right

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<sup>20</sup> Anne Lee, ‘Bullying in the Church’, citing website accessed 17th July 2006: <<http://www.media.anglican.com.au/tma/2006/02/bullying.html>>. After five years of operation, the incidence is down to 25%. See also <[www.balmnet.co.uk](http://www.balmnet.co.uk)>. Not all bullying is perpetrated by leaders: see Hannah Petersen, *Power in the Pews: The Impact of Abuse and Bullying of Ministers Perpetrated by Members of the Congregation* (Bethel Pastoral Centre, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Uniting Church in Australia, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Anne Lee, ‘Bullying in the Church’, citing Marcus Beale (April 2002) SLIM paper ‘Workplace Bullying’.

## *Power in Relationships*

inside the life of God's church. It is right that we should be shocked, yet we need not be surprised. If the church is God's chosen means by which to gather those destined for eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ, then the stakes are high, and the attacks will come accordingly. The church will be more like a battleground than a peaceful pasture. As with any battleground, it will not be tidy, there will be a lot of noise, smoke and confusion, and there will be casualties. In this, God will be establishing His kingdom of prevailing righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

What is being unearthed in the church is what has been endemic in the whole community. Secular organisations, sporting clubs, small and big business, and governments—all have been at fault. Often, however, the churches have been the first to be exposed, and have had the most adverse media coverage. Why is this?

Some may say it is because people have got it in for the churches, because of people's resistance to God and antagonism towards the things of God. True as that may be, it could be that God has a larger purpose in train. Peter the apostle wrote to churches suffering under persecution, telling them not to consider it a disgrace, but rather a cause for glorifying God. He went on to say why:

For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And

‘If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,  
what will become of the ungodly and the sinners?’  
(1 Pet. 4:17–18).

When nations and peoples are ripe for judgement, God brings judgement first upon His own people. This is because, unlike the unbelievers, we have a gospel of the cross of Christ that tells us who this God who judges us really is, and



## *Identifying Abuse of Power in Relationships*

how His judgements are always with a view to His mercy.<sup>22</sup> If we have forgotten that gospel, or been slack in it, then this judgement of God forces us back to it smartly, and brings us to experience its truth. This means we then have a powerful word to speak to others, as the judgements subsequently come upon them.

It could be that we are in a nation that is ripe for God's judgement. Governments and others may well require the church to clean up its act, but their turn will come. And when it does, we will be able to tell them, from our own experience, that our Father in heaven sends these judgements not to destroy us but to cleanse us and fit us for Himself. We will be able to speak from the heart of 'the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ . . . who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds' (Titus 2:13-14), and to encourage them, as we have been encouraged, to respond not with fear but with faith.

It could be that there is no other way for the message to get through, given the hardness of our hearts. But get through it will. Thus, in all these things, God's good purposes will be well served.

Peter's conclusion is:

Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good (1 Pet. 4:19).

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<sup>22</sup> The prayer, 'In wrath may you remember mercy' (Hab. 3:2) is not saying, 'Please, give us a break'. It is affirming, and asking to see, that God's judgements are with a view to the action of His mercy.

## *Power in Relationships*

### *Questions for Reflection or Discussion*

- *How has our awareness of abuses of power in relationships been sharpened?*
- *How have we been shocked, and heartened, by their exposure?*