

Family Violence

Reclaiming a Theology of Nonviolence

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Examining the Leaves

Naming the Problem

The leaves of the many species of trees throughout the world come in a variety of sizes and shapes because they have adapted to their different environments. Family violence, a global problem that is present in most countries and that affects a large segment of people, also takes many forms and corresponds to its environment. The ground that is most fertile for family violence seems to be an environment permeated with the belief that men must be in control, that women have only a reproductive role, that children are owned and valued as possessions, and that the elderly and disabled are disposable human beings. These signs of inequality for the more vulnerable members of society are also indicators of the potential for family violence. In our approach to family violence we need to begin by studying the “leaves,” the outward signs of the presence of violence, to get a clear grasp of the challenges we face.

The most visible signs of family violence are the physical and emotional scars that result. While verbal abuse does not leave physical scars, its power should not be underestimated, because verbal abuse and emotional abuse have hidden but long-term effects on the victims. The childhood playground chant of “sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but words will never hurt me” is more realistically rendered as “sticks and stones may bruise my skin, but words will hurt forever.” It is important to emphasize that family violence produces emotional baggage that will burden its victims throughout their entire lives.

Statistics today show that every fifteen seconds in the United States a woman is beaten; two out of every five women who are murdered are killed by their husbands. Eighty-five percent of all cases of abuse involve men beating women; of the 15 percent of men who are abused, 7 percent are abused by their male partners. Domestic violence takes place in all cultures, religions, and classes; no family is exempt from its threat—and this includes Christian families. In addition, it is important to note that violence in the home usually becomes more frequent and severe over time. It is not surprising that children who grow up in violent homes come to believe that violence is normal and also an acceptable way to control others.

Sexual abuse is one of the most devastating types of violence a person can experience. For a woman it represents an injury and a brokenness to the most intimate part of who she is. A woman's sexuality is shattered in pieces, and it may take a lifetime to patch it together again. The terrible possibility that the abuse may recur hovers grimly throughout her life.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual abuse as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.”¹ Sexual abuse takes many forms, including rape, date rape, nonconsensual intercourse, sexual abuse of children, forced marriage, denial of one's right to use contraception, forced abortion, female genital mutilation, and obligatory inspections for virginity. The seduction of women and girls when vulnerable is also termed abuse. During their lifetimes, as many studies show, one out of three women will experience sexual violence in one or another of these forms. Unfortunately, throughout history sexual abuse in this form has also been used as a weapon of war.

Male victims of sexual abuse are less likely to report such offenses because of the shame attached, but this does not mean that this type of abuse is not real. In most cultures men are socialized not to demonstrate “weaknesses” such as crying and not to talk openly about their feelings. This is also a form of oppression that is characteristic of patriarchal cultures. Fortunately, some specialized agencies exist that are geared to these concerns.

Abuse also exists within religion. While this form of abuse is more difficult to identify, it is a powerful force in many Christian homes

and churches. In the name of the cross, many women are abused, tortured, and even killed to satisfy the common good of a male-oriented religion. In churches and in the media, sermons still promote the submission of women to men as part of the order established by God at creation. Advocates often use and abuse scripture to support their cause of “putting women in their place.”

A more subtle form of abuse occurs when women’s voices are removed from the decision-making processes in churches or when churches refuse to ordain women into ministry or to appoint them as supervisors or overseers. Although these issues have been resolved for many mainline Protestant denominations, even today some churches do not allow women to preach. This includes the more conservative Christian evangelical churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church. Marie Fortune reminds us that “the familial model of church life has developed in recent years in an effort to overcome the isolation of contemporary life and to build intimate, caring relationships among church members. Unfortunately, just as there is potential for abuse in families, there is potential for abuse in the church that views itself as family.”²

It is also important to point out that family violence in most cases is gender-based violence that involves the physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse of girls and women. Gender-based violence has evolved in part from the subordinate status of women in society. Indeed, many cultures have beliefs, norms, and social institutions that legitimize and perpetuate violence against women. Acts that would be punished almost universally if directed at an employer or employee, a neighbor, or an acquaintance often go unchallenged when men direct them at women within family settings.³

According to the manual *No to Violence*⁴ the term *abuse* suggests to some people that the behavior is more serious than the term *violence* would suggest. Others, however, regard *abuse* as less serious and even object to its use on the grounds that it minimizes the seriousness of violent behavior. As a result, the group No To Violence chooses to use the term *violence* to cover *all* behavior people regard as either violent or abusive and behavior that violates the right of another person to safety and well-being. Several programs aimed at changing men’s behavior also address controlling patterns of behavior that display power over women and children. Family violence, therefore can include several forms of unacceptable social behavior, including actual abuse—physical, verbal, and emotional—as well as unjust controlling behavior.

The No To Violence group also points out that experts in the field do not necessarily agree on the terminology used. No To Violence discourages use of the terms *victims* or *survivors* for the more challenging language of “women and children who have experienced violence” or “those who have been violated.” However, there is solid and widespread agreement that family violence does exist and that it damages people, destroying their human dignity and leaving them with ugly emotional and physical scars. Acknowledging that people are getting hurt in their homes by their loved ones is a good starting point.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

As a feminist, quite aware of the influence that my social context has on me, I have chosen to work on the complex issue of family violence. In doing so, I am in no way moving away from denouncing violence against women, but rather recognizing it as a manifestation of gender-based violence in our society and in families. Family is very dear to women’s hearts, and whether the family is dysfunctional or healthy, it is honored. Women are socialized to protect the family, no matter what happens within the confines of our homes. I realize increasingly that women need to be treated within their family system whenever possible; it is a disservice to treat a woman without helping the entire family, if that is feasible. Healing several individuals in the unit is more life-giving and provides greater assurance that any positive changes brought about will endure.

Counseling victims of abuse requires much patience and much caution. Whatever we do, we must not cause more harm for the victims. It is essential to listen carefully to the victims and to trust the honesty of their statements in order to accompany them in their family situation. They know better than we what is safe for them and their children and, most of all, how we can assist them at the moment. Such an empowerment model is a preferred form of intervention with battered women.

One critical question that guides my work is why intra-family violence is present in Christian homes. This includes a set of parallel questions as well: Does our current peace theology contribute in any way to intra-family violence? Does the church ever act as an accomplice to a perpetrator? What happens when a church turns a blind eye and deaf ear to family violence by not believing, not knowing, not

intervening? Without necessarily doing a statistical study, there is also a need to ask exactly who are the families or individuals who experience intra-family violence. Why are they suffering this evil alone? Are they aware of church teachings on a theology of *shalom*, peace, and nonviolence?

This book is intended to challenge all churches in the United States, particularly those that embrace a theology of nonviolence but have been slow to express their disapproval of family violence or to extend support to its victims. Many churches have spoken out courageously against the violence of war but not against violence in homes.⁵ We need to ask the simple yet profound question of why this is so. Since a theology of peace was developed as a response to a context of war, can this same theology be used to resist the “wars” in homes? Or do feminists (women and men) need to create a new theology to respond to the needs of those who suffer violence within the walls of their homes?

NONVIOLENCE AS A TOOL

Anabaptism has a rich tradition with Jesus as a model for building peace. The Anabaptist movement started in the sixteenth century when its adherents resisted governmental and religious rules that went against the principal values of the “kin-dom”⁶ of God. The kin-dom of God, where no one is excluded, is a nonhierarchical gathering of God and God’s people.⁷ However, sometime along the way it became easier to advocate for justice for the poor and ignore the cries of women. If a theology of peace does not advocate for the safety of Christian women who experience violence within supposedly Christian homes, it needs a closer look, and we must consider revising its vision and its programs. There are churches today that have achieved a degree of awareness and speak out against violence in the family. But how can these churches work for healing within families? As part of a peace theology, how can they lead men—fathers and husbands—into paths that are less macho, less in step with a sexist culture? How can churches take up the role of healer in the name of the Lord, the maker of peace? And most important of all, how can churches prevent violence in the family from occurring in the first place?

Peace communities have made few attempts to create alternatives to violence in the most basic social institution of the family. Anabaptist feminist theologians are currently working to identify some of the

underlying beliefs within Christianity and Mennonite peace theology that contribute to the problem of gender-based violence. On the other hand, these beliefs can also prevent us from seeing and understanding the problem of violence in interpersonal relationships.⁸ During the last two decades in Mennonite communities in North America, several courageous Mennonite feminists have begun to expose the painful reality that many church members—women, children, and men—have been living with violence in their Christian homes, some as victims of child sexual abuse and others as battered wives. The sexual misconduct of well-known Mennonite theologian John H. Yoder, which was exposed in the mid 1990s, is not an isolated example.⁹

Feeling disappointed by the church and its hierarchical system that protects abusers and underestimates the pain of the victims, I have attempted to expose these violent sins. Although I refer to the Mennonites (the group most familiar to me), I intentionally want to include all Christian churches. My goal is to call all Christian churches to examine once again what we are doing and how we are assisting the victims and their children who are worshiping in our churches.

The frustrating experiences of taking a woman beaten by her husband to the emergency room and taking others to a women's shelter only to have these women return home to their abusive husbands have encouraged me to imagine other options. I aim to empower abused women not to allow themselves to be beaten over and over again. However, because as human beings they have the option of choosing their own path in life, I must also respect their desire to stay in their homes even though the abuse may continue. My work takes me into many Christian homes. I always encourage victims to have a plan of safety in case the abuse should recur. In addition, I offer specific help if and when it seems needed. Occasionally I request, on behalf of the church, to work directly with the family to help them end the violence.

We need to highlight the role we believe the church has played or plays in perpetuating a theology that has been oppressive rather than liberating for women and families. Through its lack of involvement in family violence, churches have become accomplices, often protecting the male image and further victimizing women and children. There can be no neutral position when dealing with this issue. Breaking the cycle of violence must become a priority within all churches because Christ, the maker of peace, showed humankind a new way of being in the world, that of "active nonviolent resistance."¹⁰

**DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS:
VIOLENCE AND NONVIOLENCE**

Because *violence* and *abuse* can be interpreted in many ways, I want to be intentional about the terminology I am using; precise definitions are essential in establishing a framework to improve the life of families. Most important is the term *violence*. According to the *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, “the term *violence* may be applied equally to overt physical force or to covert structures of repression. What is common to both understandings, overt and covert violence, is *compulsion*.”¹¹ Violence in this sense includes hidden or covert violence that does not necessarily do direct physical harm but nonetheless destroys human dignity. Dr. Ruth Krall refers to this as “a violation of personhood.”¹² It is the subtle, institutionalized destruction of human possibilities that is around us all the time, although it may not be apparent to those who are comfortably situated. It is present, nonetheless, whenever the structures of society act to depersonalize human beings, and we need to be aware that our social and political systems can actually embed violence. In *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, Patricia Evans notes a highly significant point: “Repressive systems perpetuate themselves as long as they remain unrecognized.”¹³

Dom Hélder Câmara, a Brazilian priest who was the archbishop of Olinda and Recife in northeast Brazil and author of *Spiral of Violence* (1971), made a marvelous contribution to the world on the challenging theme of violence. In the middle of the 1970s unrest in Brazil, the largest country in Latin America, Dom Hélder had the courage to ask, Can nonviolent action serve the country?¹⁴ Dom Hélder wrote to convince humankind of the absurdity of war; today, family violence should be challenged with the same degree of power.

Dom Hélder states clearly that violence is a challenge: “Violence is not the real answer to violence; if violence is met by violence, the world will fall into a spiral of violence; the only true answer to violence is to have the courage to face the injustices which constitute violence.”¹⁵ In order to arrive at peace, we must first do justice. In the words of Dom Hélder, “Justice is the condition for peace, the path, the way,” and “injustice *is* violence.”¹⁶ Injustice is the root cause of violence, and one expression of such injustice is the abuse of power by men to control women.

The word *conflict* comes from the Latin *fligere*, meaning “to strike” or “to have friction between two people.” Conflict does not necessarily equal violence. Conflict-management experts point out that conflict is a normal part of life and that social beings who live in family structures and interact with other family members will naturally experience conflict. The key to whether the conflict is violent or not lies in how we deal with these tensions and frictions. When conflict builds up between people and no resolution is sought or found by those affected by it, conflict can explode into violence.

Widely known international mediator John Paul Lederach explained in *Enredos, pleitos y problemas* (tangles, disputes, and problems) that “conflict is natural and necessary for growth and social transformation. We are not condemned to express our differences in inhumane ways.”¹⁷ The growth to which he refers is the opportunity to identify a problem and search for creative ways to solve differences. It is important, therefore, to equip family members to mediate their own problems before these problems turn into violent behavior. In particular, families with a history of violence need to learn how to break and then to keep from repeating patterns of violence.

The term *nonviolence* is preferred to *pacifism*. Throughout recent history the traditional peace churches have moved toward use of the term *nonviolence*. *Nonviolence* is understood as a method used by Christian pacifists to make peace; it is a lifestyle that attempts to eliminate violence, denounce injustice, and search for alternative ways of transforming conflict. It is a way of life aimed at negotiating, mediating, and/or reconciling, while respecting life and seeing the sacred in all the human beings of God’s creation.

It is not surprising that *nonviolence* means different things to different people. Some mainstream Protestant church members criticize nonviolence as an ineffective means of bringing about change; they see it as too passive. At times the traditional peace churches, including among others the Mennonites, the Quakers, and members of the Church of the Brethren, have been ridiculed for their positions on peace issues. Nonetheless, members of these peace churches have chosen nonviolence as a way of life, with Jesus as their role model. As John Dear points out, Jesus frequently engaged in nonviolent activities and upheld the equality of all human beings, insisting that every human being is a daughter or a son of God.¹⁸ Members of the peace churches believe that nonviolence is the only way to denounce the evil committed against life itself. Their active nonviolence is spiritually

grounded, and it is the source of pacifist actions directed toward overcoming the violence that surrounds everyone today. They also maintain that violence tempts people to respond in the same violent way. Nonviolence consists in acting toward another person in the spirit of justice. Therefore, if violence is the absence of justice, then nonviolence can be a precondition for the possibility of justice.¹⁹

It is important to note that nonviolence has several different dimensions. *Principled nonviolence* is following Jesus regardless of personal cost. This is the nonviolence of faithfulness that is behind the stance of the Mennonite Church USA in not supporting war.

There is also *strategic nonviolence*, which describes the way we *do* nonviolence. This is the strategy used by the powerless in situations of overwhelming coercion. In many ways this is a response of women in situations of family violence. A prime example is demonstrated regularly by mothers who gather with other women in the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina on the same day of each week to cry for their disappeared loved ones. During the war in El Salvador in the 1980s, the *comadres* in El Salvador denounced to their government the injustice of the innocent being killed day after day. In *Power of the Weak* Elizabeth Janeway offers an additional example of this method of nonviolence, describing how victims actively set about disbelieving the lies of the victimizers and come together to empower each other for positive change.²⁰

In *Reweaving the Web of Life*, feminist Pam McAllister, a longtime activist on peace and justice issues, compares what feminism and nonviolence have in common. She concludes, "Both oppose power that is exploitative and manipulative."²¹ For many of us, nonviolence is an extension of feminism as we aim to dismantle the mental weaponry of a misogynist society. Nonviolence urges us never to hurt or kill one another, never to wage war, never to oppress others, never to do anything that would threaten the human race. We see it as necessary to integrate pacifism and feminism, although these two movements have not coincided throughout history. Christian feminism in general calls for a transformation of patriarchy, including male domination within the church, so we can live as the creation of God, women and men living together and working in justice and peace.²²

Nonviolent conduct is the act of refraining from violence even under direct provocation or attack. This does not mean, however, that when a man hits a woman she should receive the beating passively. The abused person can choose a response that will reflect a nonviolent

action. The woman may choose to address the abuser verbally, requesting that the abuse stop. She can denounce what she knows is wrong and tell the man why his actions are abusive to her. She may choose to leave the place of violence, and she may invoke her right to press charges. She may decide not to hit back or not to provoke him verbally and simply walk out. If the abuse ends, she may prepare a safe plan of escape in case the abuse begins again. All of these are concrete actions a woman can take that do not involve violence. It goes without saying that these actions require a degree of self-awareness of the situation and a firm decision to make better choices for herself and her children.

DEFINITION OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

A report prepared by the Office of Justice Program of the U.S. Department of Justice in June 2005 provided a legal definition of family violence: “Family Violence includes all types of violent crime committed by an offender who is related to the victim either biologically or legally through marriage or adoption. The crime [may be] done by a current or former spouse, parent or adoptive parents, current or former stepparents, [or] legal guardian.”²³ It is easy to use the term *domestic violence* interchangeably with *family violence*, but family violence includes domestic violence as well as child abuse and elder abuse. Although they are used interchangeably, I prefer the term *family violence* because it is more inclusive. Because such forms of violence occur as a result of imbalanced power between males and females, violence in the family can also result in abusive child rearing, starting a cycle of violence that reproduces itself.

Leading experts on family violence do not always agree on definitions or possible actions to be taken. The issues involved in family violence are complex; there is no “simple truth” and therefore no easy solution.²⁴ Similarly, there is no common understanding of what a healthy family looks like and whether the focus should be on the entire family or only on the victims of violence. Many moral issues as well as social and economic issues play a part in family violence. When the interplay of such issues erupts in violence, stilling the conflict becomes both urgent and emotionally charged. This makes it extremely difficult to deal with family violence as research to be undertaken in logical and objective ways. However we choose to deal

with such violence, we need to recognize it is a topic of study with practical, emotional, political, and moral dimensions. This is pointed out eloquently by Richard J. Gelles and Donileen Loseke in *Current Controversies on Family Violence*. It is generally agreed that it is a topic of public concern that needs to be addressed on many fronts: political, social, economic, and religious.

Two leading organizations in the Chicago area, Rainbow House and Mujeres Latinas en Accion, a U.S.-based Latina women's group that documents domestic violence and attempts to increase public awareness of the problem, define domestic violence as a "pattern of physical or psychological abuse, threats, intimidation, isolation or economic coercion used by one person to exert power and control over another person in the context of dating, family or household relationship."²⁵ Domestic violence is maintained by societal and cultural attitudes, institutions and laws, which are not consistent in naming this violence as wrong.

THE LEAVES: FORMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

Family violence can assume a number of forms, as shown below. This list is not exhaustive, and it should be noted that behaviors can fall into more than one category. Among the many definitions and types of family violence that are used, I have chosen these definitions from No To Violence²⁶ because they are *behavior-based* definitions that offer a larger range of manifestations of violence than many other definitions:

1. Emotional violence and controlling behaviour . . . does not accord equal importance and respect to another person's feelings and experiences. It is often the most difficult to pinpoint or identify. It can also be seen to underlie all of the other forms of violent and controlling behaviour. It includes the refusal to listen to or denial of the other's feelings, telling people what they do or do not feel and ridicule or shaming of the other's feelings. It also includes making the other responsible for one's own feelings, blaming or punishing them for how one feels, and manipulation by appeal to their feelings such as guilt, shame and worthlessness. It also includes emotional control such as telling someone directly or indirectly

that if she expresses a different point of view she will cause conflict and the avoidance of conflict is more important than how she feels.

2. Physical violence and controlling behaviour involves attacks on or threats of attack on one's physical safety and integrity. These range from hitting, kicking, punching and assault with weapons, through to murder. It can involve harming or threatening to harm children, relatives, pets or possessions. . . .
3. Verbal violence and controlling behaviour includes verbal putdowns and ridicule of any aspect of a woman's being, such as her body, her beliefs, occupation, cultural background, skills, friends or family.
4. Sexual violence and controlling behaviour includes all sexual behaviour without consent (or threats of such behaviour), such as unwanted touching, rape, exposing himself and making her view pornography. It also includes a man expecting a woman to have sex as a form of reconciliation after he has just beaten her; in these circumstances she is unable to withhold consent for fear of further violence.
5. Social violence or controlling behaviour includes all behaviour which limits, controls or interferes with a woman's social activities or relationships with others, such as controlling her movements and denying her access to her family and friends.
6. Financial violence and controlling behaviour includes not giving a woman access to her share of the shared resources, expecting her to manage the household on an impossibly low amount of money, and criticism and blame of her when she is unable to.
7. Spiritual violence or controlling behaviour includes all behaviour which denigrates a woman's religious or spiritual beliefs and preventing her from attending religious gatherings or practising her faith. It also includes harming or threatening to harm women or children in religious or occult rituals.
8. Other controlling behaviour refers to other methods used to control women that do not fit the above descriptions or may not in itself appear to be violent but that deny a woman's right to autonomy and equality, especially when used frequently or

in combination with violence. This includes telling her what to do and not allowing her to carry out her own wishes, as for example, arriving too late to look after the children when she wants to do something of which he disapproves.

Although forms of *religious violence* can fall into the above categories, religious violence deserves its own category. Forcing a woman to attend a church preferred by her husband and not allowing her to continue in her own faith is abusive. Obligating her to convert to Christianity when she already has a faith belief is disrespectful. Verbal abuse, such as calling her a demon or telling her she will go to hell because she refuses to accept her husband's faith certainly falls within this category. Perhaps the worst form of religious abuse is telling someone to tolerate suffering or abuse in the name of Christ because that is how she can share in "carrying the cross."

THE CONCEPT OF FAMILY

Family traditionally includes a biological family as well as those who live with or relate intimately to members of a given household. This may include a live-in boyfriend or girlfriend. It may include ex-spouses to whom the family needs to relate for the children's sake. The dwelling together of an extended family is very normal within several ethnic groups living in the United States and other countries as well. Occasionally, even three or four generations may live together in one household. By contrast, over the last three decades social-service and government institutions have been forced to recognize single mothers with children as heads of households. Throughout this book the definition of family includes nuclear families (those with a father, mother, and children present), single mothers with children, fathers or older siblings as heads of households, children living with grandparents or guardians, and partners (same-sex or male-female) with or without children.

Various definitions of family are used by political, religious, and cultural entities, according to their need or function. This has produced what Chilean professor of philosophy Olga Grau Duhart calls the "phenomenon of hyper-representation" of family.²⁷ Today the word *family* has different meanings and functions. Traditionally, family has meant an establishment with a hierarchical structure in which

members follow culturally determined roles. A family is usually the first hierarchical structure that human beings encounter. The word itself originates from its Latin root, *familia*, as in the Greco-Roman *paterfamilias*, which refers to all the slaves and servants belonging to the *pater* (father) in the house. All those who belong to the family submit to the will of the father, who is the chief of the house. This understanding reflected the patriarchal household value of the government.²⁸ Thus, the concept of family, which mirrored the political ideology of the republic, served a supporting role.

Grau Duhart offers new insights into how *family* might be perceived when she defines the family unit as “an affectionate climate,” a style of living together, and a normative space from which to look at institutions.²⁹ She examines how the family functions, how it changes, and how it is influenced and manipulated by outside institutions. The concept of family in the United States varies widely because of the many different ethnic constructs that are present. Traditionally, the family has been considered a fundamental unit in the organization of society. A definition with religious overtones sees *family* as “those who descend from one common progenitor; a tribe, clan, or race; kindred; house; as, the human family; the family of Abraham; the father of a family.” Perhaps the most useful American definition is “a group of kindred or closely related individuals.”

Some definitions of *family* have economic, sociological, or psychological implications. In the clinical and counseling arena, for example, *family* refers to one’s family of origin, including parents and siblings as well as spouse and children.³⁰ *Family* has also been defined as “any group of people related biologically, emotionally, or legally.” In 1948 the United Nations defined family as “the natural and fundamental group unit of society and its entitled protection by society and State.” During the last two decades, in particular, the definition of *family* has rapidly expanded to include single parents, bi-racial couples, blended families, unrelated individuals living cooperatively, and homosexual couples, among others.³¹ In 2005 the National Institute of Mental Health defined family as a “network of mutual commitment” in order to accommodate the new structures that are part of the realities of families today. In the United States today it is often lifestyles and personal choices that define a family.

While the most helpful definitions of *family* are those that aim at being descriptive and inclusive of all types of families, many definitions have an underlying motive that moves the concept of family from

being descriptive to being prescriptive. This is particularly true in the religious arena, which tends to define *family* according to an ideal that is often prescriptive, which I find less helpful. When working with family violence, the aim is to point out the strength of a united family, whose quality of life is mutually nurtured and sustained, and to identify and name any violent behavior within that family as a weakness that does harm.

Religious leaders and family counselors and therapists seek to contribute in creating a culture of peace by helping families with unhealthy patterns of behavior move family members toward healthier ways of relating to one another. Christians have the essential tools based on the common law of respect and human dignity for all presented first in the Ten Commandments, which in fact form an excellent declaration of human rights.

THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE

In learning more about the nature of violence, studies done by Colombian psychologist and seminary professor Amparo de Medina have been most helpful. She uses both a systematic and a linear approach in dealing with this problem and its multiple causes. In *Libres de la violencia familiar* (free from violence in the family), she presents research developed in 1987 by the Commission of Studies of Violence in Colombia. The commission stated that violence is a two-way process in the struggle for power in which the weak one being abused mistreats the one with power, and the person with power takes advantage of the weak.³² This research argues that there is violence within the one who imposes domination, and there is also violence within those who challenge this control.³³ From a feminist perspective, however, we have rightly learned to be cautious because such an approach tends to increase the victimization of women. When there is an imbalance of power, the weaker is always more vulnerable, and this means women in most of the cases and children at all times.

Cases of domestic violence also involve what Jorge Corsi of Argentina, a leading expert on family violence, calls “cross violence,” which occurs when a couple hits each other.³⁴ Because violence produces violence, the woman eventually strikes back after being abused for a period of time. In reported cases, women raised in violent homes may have the tendency to repeat this pattern.

What occasionally provokes women to respond with violence toward their abusers can be described as *internalized oppression*, a term more often used by scholars who analyze racism. In addition to the worthless feeling that oppression produces in victims, internalized oppression affects their psyche in such a way that they are prone to be violent within their families and even with others of their own gender. This includes women who use violent behavior with other women, with their own children, with their intimate partners, and with their physical surroundings. After years of being abused, oppression may produce violent behavior in abused women as a direct result of the internalized oppression they have lived with. As a Latina who has lived in the minority sector of several American cities, I have seen the aggressive behavior of Latinos against members of their own ethnic group and also against blacks, and the same behavior exhibited within the black ethnic group. This results from the oppression suffered by all minority groups in the United States. Violence is a learned behavior.

There are also women who emotionally and physically abuse their spouses or partners; however, national statistics on adult domestic violence continue to show that only 5 percent of the victims of abuse are men (although this percentage is growing) while 95 percent are women. In any case, both men and women can be victims of violence, and in many cases the children whose eyes and ears witness violent incidents at home become secondary victims. Professor Medina notes that violence is a result of a social context that not only tolerates violence but also justifies it.³⁵ Toleration and justification of violence are often key in reproducing violence.

A THEOLOGY OF NONVIOLENCE

Christian peace theology and a theology of nonviolence are both present within the biblical concept of *shalom*, which is understood as peaceful well-being and justice. *Shalom* can include peace with God, peace with self, peace with neighbor, and peace with the environment. In order to have a richer sense of *shalom*, its spiritual meaning must also include political, economic, and social justice. Peace theology has a continuum of practices, one of which is nonviolence. I have chosen to walk a path of nonviolence, believing that nonviolence is the truest expression of peace theology and that it is constitutive of *shalom*. Some believers in peace as a Christian practice may not choose to express

their stances in nonviolent ways and may limit their actions to nonresistance. However, as a peacemaker, I believe that God calls Christians to engage in nonviolent action. Thus, when I use *a theology of nonviolence* throughout this book, I am referring to the specific way of bringing peaceful resolution through active nonviolence.

The kin-dom of God exists in the sharing of sisterhood and brotherhood within a community of faith. In the early church the brothers and sisters who worshiped together understood that the kin-dom of God was present in the way believers lived together in peace, in mutual exhortation, and in the sharing of both material goods and spiritual blessings.

Many churches today in North America are heavily influenced by a strong Pentecostal current or charismatic movement, including churches attached to the “gospel of prosperity.” Even mainstream Protestant churches have suffered divisions because of the so-called Spirit movement.³⁶ This seems to indicate that people are searching for something different, something that has not been previously available, perhaps a feeling or an emotion that will fill their emptiness or alleviate their internal pains and struggles. Phoebe, a friend of mine who is a victim of domestic violence, moved from the Baptist faith in which she was raised to the Bahai faith, then to Roman Catholicism, and finally to a large charismatic church. Today she admits to feeling invisible, but she also feels useful through work in the church’s social-action program. Today people who are looking for something different to fill their spiritual needs are not hesitant to move from one faith community to another. Many of these people include wounded women and their children who are searching for a safe spiritual home. What do our churches have to offer them? In addition, some Anabaptist Mennonites, members of traditional peace churches, have abandoned their peace heritage with its rich theology of nonviolence. As a result of these trends, some peace churches are not actively offering nonviolence theology as a practical tool for Christian living. In these churches, family life has suffered.

During the last five decades, social and economic conflicts have motivated our Anabaptist leaders to rethink how the theology of peace can help the church respond to the many crises in the world. While many religious leaders have used the just-war theory³⁷ to support action in World War I and World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the Iraq War, Mennonites throughout history have practiced active nonviolence by walking with war-torn communities

and confronting injustices. Nonviolence is not new to our time. Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many other leaders in the civil rights movement were firm believers and practitioners of nonviolent resistance.

Nevertheless, nonviolent responses have not always been viewed as the course for activism. In the German-Swiss Mennonite tradition of the nineteenth century, U.S. Mennonites became the “quiet in the land,” practicing nonresistance and keeping themselves separate and uninvolved in current issues. However, in his article “Can We Make Sense of Mennonite Peace Theology?” John R. Burkholder reminds us that “liberation nonviolence calls for increased involvement in achieving the goals of justice, peace, salvation and reconciliation.”³⁸ During the history of the Mennonite Church, Mennonite peace theology has ranged from nonresistance to pacifism, terms that cover a wide spectrum of Mennonite views about peace theology. There are undoubtedly similar journeys in other peace churches as well as in the traditional Protestant churches and the Catholic Church that embrace a particular peace theology in their life and ministry. However, since the 1970s, biblical beliefs on nonviolence have been seen as an integral part of peace theology in the Mennonite tradition.

Peace theology is also influenced by the social location and personal experience of theologians and of the receiving communities. It may have quite a different shape in the United States, Canada, Nicaragua, and Kenya. John R. Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich have summarized the diversity of thought and practice within peace theology, addressing issues pertinent to their times. It is not surprising that issues such as war, taxes used to support war, the draft, and foreign-policy decisions about third-world poverty have dictated the focus of particular peace theologies.³⁹ But none has dealt with the violence present in the private order of families. I maintain that a theology of nonviolence and peace has much to say about domestic violence, which is a family, community, and societal problem; churches can and should take an active role in ending violence within families by teaching the practices of nonviolence as biblical principles.

During the 1980s some traditional peace churches (Mennonites, Quakers, Church of the Brethren, and others) came together to address common worldwide issues. As part of the wider ecumenical movement, peace churches had been participating in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which brought together leaders from the American Baptist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church, the

Disciples of Christ, the Mennonites, and the Quakers, among others. They unified efforts to respond to the wars in Central America and to foster better relations with our sisters and brothers in Cuba. The Mennonite Central Committee (an eighty-five-year-old development and relief organization of the Mennonites, Mennonite Brethren, and Brethren in Christ churches in the United States and Canada) has been a key instrument in promoting these initiatives.

In addition to seeking peace in situations of conflict and war, Anabaptists have searched for an ecclesiology that will help create the community of faith and shalom that God expects of us. Anabaptist Juan Driver has developed an ecclesiology with vital possibilities for us today in America that is in harmony with the theology of peace and nonviolence. He advocates a church that understands its mandate for here and now, and he speaks of a radical vision relevant for today's social, political, and economic reality.

Driver's vision offers a liberating reading of the Hebrew Bible and of our times, showing how the church can participate in the salvific project of God. Driver's work shows how radically Jesus lived his life and how the messianic community of the first century understood God's call through Jesus and lived those principles of peace. Driver sees the need for the churches to embrace a radical new ecclesiology that reflects the implications of being a church of Jesus Christ in the world.⁴⁰ His message is clear and practical, using illustrations from his vast experience working with many churches in the United States, Latin America, and Spain. He is concise in advocating that a missional community must be intentional in proclaiming that the kin-dom of God has arrived and that Christ's reign must be present in the way we live that call. God desires a kin-dom in which interpersonal relationships correspond to the divine intentions of God expressed in the covenant with Moses (Lv 26:3–6). With courage, the messianic community must confront the world's injustices present in the wider community. However, and more important, we must seek justice for the people closest to us, that is, our family. We must be alert to the false values that foster pretense and domination. On the contrary, the community of Christ must incarnate the true values of the kin-dom of God.⁴¹ Driver reminds us that "the church is not the kin-dom. It is, rather, the messianic community in the service of the kin-dom. . . .In the church's life and values, it anticipates the kin-dom."⁴²

Churches need to remember that their mandate is to opt for life, recognizing that this has enormous consequences for all of humanity.

Christians are called not only to resist evil but also to create and live out a viable alternative, and this includes life within the family. All Christian families should examine in what ways they reflect gospel values and how they might relate to one another in kindness and love inside the privacy of their homes. And it is important to remember that evil and violence can come about through human actions but also through neglect. Time must be set aside and devoted to cultivating relationships within families.

Our Anabaptist foremothers and forefathers of the Radical Reformation in the sixteenth century advocated a concrete and personal experience of salvation. This was a salvation with an important communal expression that was obedient to the teachings of Jesus and imitated the first-century Christian community. This Anabaptist model of restoration was very supportive of family and of close communal relationships.

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE FAMILY

How can the quality of life in families that suffer from violence be improved when the privacy of the family is revered today in our country? Will family members allow outsiders to come in and witness or question violent behavior? To begin with, disagreement on various social and cultural levels about what constitutes violent behavior makes it difficult to confront or change such behaviors. Although there are laws that spell out what is harmful behavior, groups and individuals often will not admit the presence of violence in their homes because they feel “everything is normal here.” A sound quality of life in a family should include the absence of abuse, violent behavior, and forms of injury among all members of that family; this goes beyond the mere nonexistence of conflict.

A member of my church once told me that her husband, who had total control of the family’s money, would punish her by not giving money to her or her children to take the bus to go to church on Sunday. This certainly qualifies as abusive behavior. Should the church—or I as a member of the church—speak out or take a position? If the home is a continuation or part of the church community, then should we enter the “sacred space” within the family? In order to break the cycle of violence, we must speak out and protect those who are suffering or are in danger, confronting the problem with an attitude of love.

Sociologists Richard Gelles and Murray Straus, widely known for their research into domestic violence, describe the inequality of women and children in relation to men as one of the leading causes of violence in family life. One of the many faces of this inequality is poverty, which is highly visible across many cultures today. In Colombia, 69 percent of the population lives in poverty. Of this group, 20 percent live in absolute misery; over half of these are women.⁴³ In rural Zimbabwe and throughout most of Africa women are responsible for most of the production and processing of food crops, while men control the means of production. In Japan and other countries in Asia women are taught to obey their fathers when they are unmarried, their husbands when married, and to be under the protection of their sons when old. In the United States and other developed countries, for women of color (Latinas, Asians, women of African descent, and Native Americans) this inequality is often triply expressed in sexist, racist, and classist attitudes.

SIGNS OF VIOLENCE PRESENT IN US

As we examine closely the leaves of this tree of family violence, we can see the texture of the leaves, the veins that provide nourishment, and also the structure that lies beneath the surface. Within human beings, there is also an underlying structure that has many elements, including the tendency to reproduce violence. When we are exposed to it, we somehow seem to become contaminated with its germs.

In *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*, James Newton Poling, a theologian specializing in pastoral care, describes his experience in assisting women and children who have been victims of abuse and his experience in assisting the offenders. Poling describes the resilience and the hope he has seen in those who were once victims and who today are celebrating their survival.⁴⁴ Even in the midst of violence they have experienced or may be experiencing in their families, it has still been possible for them to “bounce back up.” The National Network for Family Resiliency notes that family resiliency is “the family’s ability to cultivate strengths to positively meet the challenges of life.”⁴⁵ When working on the complex issue of family violence, it is important to recognize that the family is a structure in which domination and control create conditions for abuse. We human beings have the power both to nurture and at the same time to hurt others by words and by actions.

As a mother of two young girls, I must confess that on occasion my humanity has influenced me to lift my hand and, in a spirit of correction, hit them. The force of my adult hand on the vulnerable and weak arm of my younger child produced a dislocation of her delicate bones in the spring of 1998. I inflicted this on her while expressing my anger after she had slapped my face. I am responsible for my violent action. In my Puerto Rican culture, it is considered a great offense if a person slaps your face, and a sign of particular disrespect if a child does this to a parent. I recognize that I reacted out of anger and that my embedded culture of violence rose instantaneously within me. I did not try to justify my actions to the nurse in the doctor's office. I explained all that had happened and that I was deeply ashamed of my actions. I am still amazed at how I, a person who believes in peace-making, could do this to my child.

In order for evil to be overcome, we must face the tendency in ourselves and in others to use power in evil ways. Only when we face the depth of our own ambiguity—that both good and evil are present within us—will we discover the resilient hope that power can be used with justice. As well stated by Poling, “Only when we confess the abuse of power in our lives, confront the abuse of power in others, repent of its evil, and commit ourselves anew to justice and righteousness will the possibility of evil be contained.”⁴⁶

The spiral of violence also moves the definition of *violence* to a deeper level. Forces within society today seem to perpetuate violence, turning it into a spiral that sinks lower and lower.⁴⁷ When we sense an injury to our person, we often turn to inflict injury on another. Our hope is that we are conscious of this pull and the need for awareness every day to resist the spiral with nonviolent strategies and in the end overcome it.

A first step is to search for a new definition of *love*, one that moves away from a love that tolerates abuse. Any concept of God we have learned that involves a God who calls us to suffer is distorted and needs to be dismantled. This certainly includes an omnipotent God who encourages victims to suffer in silence from the evil of others. Jesus brought life, not death, to those who suffer. We need to discover a “God of love and power who is not patriarchal and does not encourage victims to suffer.”⁴⁸ A father who beats the mother or a mother who hits her children does not image a loving God. Such individuals must begin an intensive healing process so they image instead a God who is compassionate, loving, and forgiving.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Do churches have the courage to begin examining this evil of domestic violence? To do so will involve a willingness to examine critically a church's own complicity in violence against women, children, and others who are vulnerable in society. Once a community of faith understands its own complicity, it must dismantle it and then become a resource of healing for those who are hurt and damaged by the abuse of power. I believe firmly that all churches are called to encourage their members to live the values of the kin-dom of God each day, stating clearly that violence in our lives is unacceptable. Churches around the world must be willing to support and at times intervene when family violence is suspected or evident.⁴⁹ As Poling states, "Abuse of power is a theological problem."⁵⁰

How can churches advocate for peace in families that suffer violence in the privacy of their homes? In the Hebrew Bible, the concept of *shalom*, or peace, is holistic; it describes the state of well-being that God wants for all people. Such well-being refers not only to physical conditions but also to harmony in relationships within the community. It begins with taking care of those who are not provided for, including orphans, widows, and foreigners (Dt 10:18). Given the injustices that the people of Israel were perpetuating toward their own kind, God's desire for harmony in relationships was a message of confrontation from prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos.

Ezekiel expressed an important message to the royal courts when he described them with the words, "They have misled my people, saying 'Peace,' when there is no peace" (13:10). The prophet Jeremiah also warned the people: "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (6:14). However, the problem went beyond that of simply declaring peace when there was no war; the internal condition of the nation itself was not one of *shalom*. The peace proclaimed by the prophets was a state of *shalom* that was based on internal and external harmony with one's self, with God-Sophia,⁵¹ and with the rest of humanity. At the time of the prophets, authentic peace, the living in harmony required by Yahweh, was usually absent.

An analogy can be made between the Israelite community at the time of the prophets and the conditions in which Christian families live today in the privacy of their homes. The desire for peace is often

overwhelmed by internal chaos, which can take the form of illness, poverty, lack of time, or unemployment. As faith communities we must develop a clear ministry toward families in order to walk with them, to help them identify the roots of the conflict and violence they experience, and to support them in their journey as Christians who deserve to live the *shalom* that God-Sophia intends for all people, with a quality of life in which daily problems and conflicts are solved peacefully. God's plan for salvation and *shalom* are good news that must be brought to these families.

The peace to which the prophets referred was the peace promised to them in the covenant between God and God's people given to Moses: "If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them . . . I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; . . . and no sword shall go through your land" (Lv 26:3–6). The purpose of the Law given to Moses was to teach the people that all were to be treated justly; a life lived in *shalom* meant equality for all.

God-Sophia also hears the cry of wives oppressed under the domination of violent husbands, just as God-Sophia is sensitive to the cry of a vulnerable child who may be physically injured or sexually molested by a family member. In this same way the church should be prepared to hear the cries and become involved in the lives of families who are suffering. If younger members of the community of faith do not live in peace in the supposedly safe environment of their homes, then we, the church, become accomplices to the sins committed against them. The prophets' message to Christian churches today is that it is time for us to live our theology of nonviolence actively, starting at home. While our first task as churches is to create awareness of the violence that affects our families, we must not stop there. We must embark on the enterprise of constructing a model of being Christian families who know how to live in harmony, incarnating holistic peace.

SIGNS OF DESPAIR AND SIGNS OF HOPE

Because manifestations of the epidemic of violence are so devastating today, we must examine whether the theology of nonviolence of Jesus presents a viable and practical solution for this social ailment. The story of Mary, a survivor of violence, can demonstrate how her peace church journeyed with her toward healing. While interviewers

usually change the names of subjects in order to protect their privacy, Mary told me she wanted to keep her name because her healing journey moved her from feeling bitter to feeling the glory of God shine in her life again.

Mary's life has not been easy; in fact, it has been a hard road to travel, particularly when at age forty she discovered she had been sexually abused as a child not once but several times by male relatives. (It is not uncommon for victims of sexual abuse to remove such traumatic experiences from their memory.) By age forty she had a seventeen-year-old son and a twenty-year-old daughter. She described her marriage as "not good" because she hated the sexual intimacy and was using all the excuses in the book to say no to sex. She knew her sexuality was not dead but severely "wounded." After a frightening experience in which she felt herself attracted to another man, she convinced her husband that both of them should attend a Marriage Encounter weekend, a Christian retreat for couples to evaluate their relationship and work at strengthening their marriage vows. She cried from the moment she arrived at the retreat. Her primary discovery was that she had never learned to love herself. Grateful for the prayers of the retreat leaders, she finished the retreat in a more hopeful spirit.

The evening Mary returned from the retreat, as she was unpacking books that had arrived at her office, she came across one entitled *Child Abuse and Hope for Healing*. She began reading and, as she read descriptions of the signs of abuse, she recognized herself. She could identify many of those signs present in her life: depression; continual body aches, including backaches and headaches; and the presence of a constant knot in her stomach. This was in the spring of 1989. She began to give voice to what had happened in her childhood, identifying the abusers. Mary experienced a great relief, realizing that her forty-year-old secret could no longer remain silent. She proceeded to seek out safe places where she could share her story with supportive friends and receive pastoral care and counseling.

Then Mary asked a Christian counselor from the church if he knew of any Christian support groups for abused women in the area. Learning that none was available, Mary, with the advice of the counselor, started a support group. Mary's pastor opened the church for the group, and the women began to meet weekly. Mary was grateful for her pastor's understanding and support, and even his willingness, at Mary's suggestion, to preach about domestic violence. While women are not allowed to preach in her church, the pastor gave her time during the

sermon to describe her work helping women recover from sexual abuse they suffered as children. The pastor later delegated several couples to counsel a young married couple that was going through the wife's struggle with the pain associated with sexual abuse during her childhood.

Mary was fortunate to have a supportive husband who entered into the healing process and who encouraged her to use her experience to help other women. He advised her not to "waste her pain." In the years that followed, she, together with women professionals, was instrumental in assisting her larger church body to form a committee to address issues of abuse, recovery, and prevention, including accountability for church leaders who themselves were sexual offenders.

Today, in her mid-fifties, Mary has collaborated in developing materials on the theme of sexual abuse and family violence for her wider faith community; she leads groups for men who batter their partners/wives; and she continues to share her story. And, in a humble way, she recognizes that while she is not totally healed, she is healed enough to be an instrument of healing for others.