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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of the religious community in the prevention of various forms of family abuse. Discussion first sets forth assumptions made in the text and identifies beliefs underlying the disregard of the religious community that is found among professionals and in the literature on the family. General responses to the beliefs are followed by a description of the ABCX model of adaptation to family stress. This model provides a base for integrating perspectives of religious and professional communities. Family stress, which is seen as the combined interaction of a stressor or stressors, is labelled A. Presence or lack of resources for dealing with stressors is labelled B, while the family's perception of the stressors is labelled C. All three of these factors interact, and can result in a crisis, labelled X, at a catalytic point. The model can be used for an understanding of the relation of the concept of sin to family abuse. Concluding discussion suggests four approaches which substantially reduce the temptation of a family or a family member to behave abusively when the approaches are implemented by the religious community in a coordinated fashion. These approaches involve lowering the level of risk by removing or reducing the stressors; providing family members with appropriate resources; facilitating positive perceptions; and holding individuals accountable for their behavior by encouraging a change of will. (RH)

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HANDLING STRESS AND ABUSE IN THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

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It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the role of the religious community in the prevention of various forms of family abuse. In doing so, I am making certain assumptions which should be clarified at the outset. First, since my own faith could generally be described as evangelical Christian, my experiences and my theological framework are biased accordingly. While I have made efforts to screen out my biases, I assume you have the ability to complete that task and make the appropriate applications to your own faith backgrounds to the extent that they differ from my own.

Second, I assume the stance of one working from within the religious community. Those of us who are within the religious community have experienced the attempts of others to "solve" our problems. Not surprisingly, we have reacted with considerable resistance. While part of this is unjustified, a significant part of it is in reaction to the insensitivity of some to the tenets of faith which are held to be of extreme value by those of us within the religious community.

Third, I make the assumption that you are familiar with the reality of various forms of abuse within religious families. While I believe this reality is reasonably well documented, I will not use our limited time here to review this research. Rather, I will assume its reality and focus on the religious community's response to it.

Finally, I am assuming some familiarity with family abuse research. I will make some general statements I believe are easily supported in the literature and in personal professional experience. However, given what I believe to be the general acceptance of these statements and the practical focus of this paper, I will not spend time debating research here.

In order to contextualize what the religious community can do in response to the problem of family abuse, we should first address the current situation. When it comes to family abuse, I have found that the religious community is frequently held in disregard both in family literature and in the professional community. This attitude tends to center around the following charges:

1. Male authority, fostered by the church, contributes to the problem of spouse abuse.
2. Some religious teachings require the wife to submit to her husband's will--even in accepting abuse.
3. The church encourages the wife to suffer abuse to keep the family together.

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4. Christianity has always encouraged spouse abuse and christian history supports spouse abuse.
5. The religious community has not acknowledged family violence as a problem.

Rather than respond to these charges individually and in depth here, I would suggest the following general responses:

1. One of the keys to the charges leveled is that religious teachings are reinforcing abusive tendencies in families. In essence, religion is accused of saying that men have authority over women, even if they are abusive; parents can punish their children without limits; and families should stay together even if it means sacrificing the safety of its members. All of these teachings have been shown to correlate with various forms of family abuse. While it could be argued that these teachings are not central to all faiths, and that few religious groups would agree with them, I believe it is true that we have at best allowed these teachings to be promulgated without significant response. At worst, I suspect we can all think of religious groups that do make these statements

2. Much of the substance of the charges frequently made center on the personal behaviors of religious members and leaders. While this is an embarrassment to those of us in the religious community, we have to accept the basic tenet of all faiths that humanity is imperfect. It follows then that any given person will be imperfect both in their articulation of faith and in their example.

3. Central to the faith tenets of most major religions is honest self examination and, when shortcomings are found, repentance. In this context this means that while the specifics of these charges could be debated, the fact is that historically, we have at best ignored the problem of family abuse, and frequently we have purposely or inadvertently contributed to the problem. Perhaps more than any other act or program, a public recognition of this fact, coupled with a commitment to changing it would have an extremely significant impact on the problem of family abuse.

In summary, the religious community has two choices when confronted with such charges. We can become defensive and invest a great deal of energy in debate, or we can admit where we have historically fallen short and invest our energies in correcting this to the best of our ability. Not only is the second of these options the only one with any promise of change--it is the most consistent with our own beliefs.

Now that we have explored the context of the religious community's response to the problem of family abuse, we move to the foundation of this

response. In the religious community, the concept of sin, or in some communities the lack of responsible behavior, is central to an understanding of personal wrong doing. In the professional community, the research indicates that the presence of certain factors predisposes individuals and families to abusive behavior. While these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive, the two communities frequently act as though they are. I propose the use of the ABCX model of adaptation to family stress as a means of integrating the two perspectives. As we shall see, this integration also provides a model for response.

The ABCX model of adaptation to family stress was originally proposed by Ruebin Hill. This model provides for the presence and influence of a variety of factors which, when brought together can lead to a specific crisis event. Family stress is seen as the combined interaction of a stressor (or stressors) labeled "A", the existing resources (or lack thereof) which the family has for dealing with the stressors labeled "B", and the perception the family holds of the stressors labeled "C", which all interact together and can result in a crisis "X" at a catalytic point. The recurrence and combination of various such interactions over time leads to a family pattern of handling various stressors. These interactions can lead to a positive response (bonadaptation) or a negative response (maladaptation).

A shift in terminology allows for this model to be used in understanding how the concept of sin relates to family abuse. The ABCX model clearly shows the influence of various factors which can be seen as placing temptation on the family members to respond negatively (sin). The more pressure to respond negatively, the greater the temptation. While this temptation is not irresistible, it is no secret that humanity's track record is poor when it comes to resisting. When we search for an appropriate response to family abuse, the best approach is therefore a preventive one. In essence, focusing on avoiding, rather than resisting, temptation. Using the ABCX model, this translates to removing or weakening stressors, providing resources, and improving perspectives.

Using this model, I suggest four approaches which, when implemented by the religious community in a coordinated fashion, substantially reduce the temptation the individual or family is undergoing to respond in an abusive manner. The first approach is to lower the level of risk by removing (or reducing) the stressor itself. For example, if the stressor is low self-esteem, strengthening the self esteem of its membership reduces the temptation to be abusive. If the stressor is unemployment, the community can assist in finding work, etc. If the stressor is financial, temporary assistance can be arranged. The religious community can

contribute substantially to the reduction or elimination of most stressors (see handout) until such time as the family is better equipped to handle them.

The second approach is providing family members with appropriate resources. These can be internal or external. For example, the community can strengthen internal resources by providing means for facilitating the growth of the members' faith. It can strengthen external resources by providing opportunities for friendship, support groups, or even professional help, when needed. By providing these resources, the community empowers the family to deal constructively with their own stressors.

The third approach is the facilitating of positive perceptions. In most cases, this translates to the teaching ministry of the religious community. Through religious education, pastoral statements, sermons, ongoing education, pastoral counseling, etc. the religious community can provide a vast amount of educational input to its membership and the community. Subjects such as family strengths, parenting, marriage enrichment, social skills, etc. are important for positive perception of family stress. Perhaps more importantly, the religious community can teach the value of each family member, and the appropriate treatment of family members under stress.

The fourth approach is to hold individuals accountable for their behavior by encouraging a change of will. Nothing in the ABCX model rules out the individual's freedom to choose a positive or negative response. The religious community is in a uniquely key position to call its membership and the surrounding community to examine its behavior and change when it is needed. By challenging family members to respond consistently with their own higher ideals, and by providing personal support to that person during this process, we increase the likelihood of their responding positively instead of negatively.

In summary, let me share with you an insight from one of the "outsiders" I referred to earlier. Though she did not believe in any particular faith and she was not hopeful that the religious community would be responsive, she said, "the shame is that there is no group in our society more capable of making a difference than the religious community". I share her view of our potential, but not her pessimism. I have offered one model for the church to use in attacking the problem of family abuse. It only remains for those of us in the religious community to do what can be done.

RISK FACTORS FOR FAMILY ABUSE

STRESSORS:

Marital stress (regardless of cause)
Single parenthood
Large number of children
Unemployment or irregular employment
Financial stress
Physical stress (illness, chemical dependency, etc.)
Frequent moves
Relationship stress (friends, extended family, etc.)
Abuse of some type already existing in the family

LACK OF RESOURCES:

Financial problems
Social Isolation
Low self esteem/feelings of inadequacy
Lack of faith
Low educational level
Lack of social skills/parenting skills
Rigid personality/lack of temper control

PERCEPTIONS:

Low self esteem
History of abuse in family of origin
Perception of one child as "different"
Negative experience associated with the birth of the child
Unmet, or unrealistic expectations of the child
Jealousy
Fundamentalist religious background:
-belief in the authoritarian/dominant role of the male
-belief in unlimited right to discipline children
-value of family solidarity over safety