A Call for Inclusion, Mutual Accountability and Action:

The Role of the Religious Sector in Preventing and Addressing Violence and Child Abuse

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This article explores the unique role and mandate of the religious sector and the implications of this in preventing and addressing violence and child abuse. It calls on New Zealand government ministries to include the religious sector in joined up approaches to violence and child abuse prevention and intervention and for religious institutions and communities to prioritise these issues, harness their potential to prevent and respond to child abuse and address barriers within their religious settings which can perpetuate or enable such violence and abuse.

Violence and child abuse are complex, persistent, and significant public health, Indigenous and human rights issues[i]. Aotearoa New Zealand has amongst the highest reported rates of intimate violence, sexual violence, and violence within family and whānau in the developed world. The true statistics, particularly of child abuse are not known as most abuse goes unreported due to grooming, shame, stigma, and institutional cultures of denial. The Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry, survivors and survivor groups are however revealing the nature and extent of institutional violence and abuse in state and faith care settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. For those who survive violence, the socioeconomic, psychological, spiritual, relational and health effects are adverse, pervasive and have long-term costs for individuals, family and whānau, communities, and society. Increasingly, violence is being viewed as a preventable and solvable problem[ii]. We know integrated and effective systems responses are required to address violence and abuse in New Zealand. This involves government, multiple sectors and agencies, iwi, and diverse communities.

Preventing and Addressing Violence and Abuse: The Religious Sector

The inclusion of the religious sector[1] as a specific strand of community in joined up integrated strategies such as Te Aorere Kura strategy is important as approximately 44 percent of New Zealand's population affiliate[2] with a religion. Christianity remains the largest single religion in New Zealand with approximately 1,720,000 New Zealanders affiliating with one of the Christian faiths. Of this total, approximately 230,000 Māori, 260,000 Pacific people and 190,000 Asian people affiliate with a Christian denomination[iii.] Since the 1980s there has also been significant growth in the numbers of people adhering to non-Christian religions.

> "Approximately 44% of New Zealand's population affiliate with a religion"

The number affiliating with Hindu and Islam religions, for example, has shown a large increase to approximately 123,000 and 61,000 respectively[iv.] Religious communities include those disproportionately impacted by family and sexual violence: women, children, and young people, tangata whenua, Pacific peoples, disabled people, older people, LGBTQIA+ community members, those from ethnic communities, compounding forms of disadvantage and discrimination. It is within religious settings diverse people come together. Both victims and perpetrators of violence are often members of the same congregation or places of worship or gathering.

The Unique Role and Mandate of Religious Institutions and Communities

Religious institutions and congregations have the unique role of guiding their members' conduct and morals through texts, traditions, teachings, and doctrines[v] while charged with the role to protect and nurture the spiritual wellbeing of the community and its individual members through providing direct support, guidance, or instruction[vi]. In addition to this, religious institutions are often umbrella entities for congregations, theological colleges and education and social service provision, including the provision of State funded schools, residential and non-residential care.

Religious institutions and congregations are in powerful positions of moral authority, or perceived authority, built on a great deal of trust and shared community as well as institutional hierarchy[vii]. People of faith will often disclose violence and/or seek and access help within religious institutions and at the congregational level[viii]. The way that violence and abuse occur and the impacts of it within religious institutions, communities and congregations is nuanced and specific[3]. It is important to note that I refer to 'religion', 'religious institutions', and 'congregations' in the very broadest sense, but of course, religions are not homogenous. Within religions and denominations there are different strands, levels of observance and varying practices. Sectarian groups, new religious movements and cultic movements also need to be considered.

> The potential of the religious sector to help prevent and address abuse and family violence is important, as is the need to address barriers within religious settings which can perpetuate or enable such violence.

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[1] Religious institutions, communities, and congregations. This includes sectarian groups and cultic movements.

[2] Stats NZ (2019) defines religious affiliation as "the self-identified association of a person with a religion, denomination, or sub-denominational religious group" (n.p.).

[3] Egan-Bitran's 2022 study highlights that "While there is a growing body of international literature on different forms of interpersonal violence in religious contexts this has predominantly been in the North America (Ames et al., 2011; Bent-Goodley, 1996, 2000, 2009; Bent-Goodley et al., 2015; Choi, 2015a, 2015b; Davis & Johnson, 2021; Nason-Clark et al., 2017, 2020; Pyles, 2007; Rotunda et al., 2004; Williams & Jenkins, 2019), and less examined in New Zealand and Australia (Pepper & Powell, 2022; Priest, 2018; Truong et al., 2020). New Zealand does not have any studies on the prevalence of intimate partner violence within Christian contexts. Australia's first study on the prevalence of intimate partner violence in Christian contexts was only recently carried out in 2019 for the Australia Anglican church and found that the prevalence of intimate partner violence is similar or greater among Anglicans than in the Australian community at large (Pepper & Powell, 2022)".

This includes the potential to create a culture of violence prevention by raising awareness of the nature of violence, that it occurs within faith families, within their faiths and wider society, the unacceptability of such violence and the supports available to those experiencing violence and for perpetrators to stop their violent behaviour. Research highlights the potential role Christian churches can play in Pacific communities to prevent and address violence due to religious leaders' positions and teachings being held in high regard and being influential in local governance and wider societal beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours[ix]. Religious institutions, congregations and religious leaders can also help challenge and address often intersecting structural inequalities which are drivers of violence, including racism, gender inequality, ableism and discrimination based on sexual orientation through influencing social norms, beliefs, and behaviours.

This could be through guiding and shaping congregational and community members understanding of what healthy relationships are and how to build and maintain these. This includes, guiding congregational members on the importance of respectful relationships which value equality and uphold each other's dignity, interpretations of notions such as forgiveness and the link with justice also require clarification to ensure that interpretations do not maintain and support violence. When violence is disclosed, religious institutions, congregations and clergy can support the safety and empowerment of victims of forms of interpersonal violence, provide spiritual and emotional comfort and support, practical assistance and be a source of healing for families. This includes religious institutions and congregations linking victims and perpetrators to specialist agencies to support healing and to help stop the perpetrator's violent behaviour. The literature shows women's church groups are one of the more powerful ways churches respond to interpersonal violence within churches and within the communities they serve.[x]

The Reality

The reality is that the religious sector is, however, less examined in New Zealand. Within New Zealand, unfortunately, past victims who disclosed violence in religious settings or sought help were not always believed, were silenced, or did not receive the help they needed.[xi] On commencing my doctoral thesis in 2014 I noted there was not a clear pathway, infrastructure, or funding to support raising awareness of interpersonal violence, nor to progress the role religious institutions could play in prevention and intervention across the prevention continuum. Eight years later this is still the case. While E Tū Whānau, Pasefika Proud and The Campaign for Action does work with some local religious congregations or communities it is still in an ad hoc manner with no formal relationships, pathways, infrastructure, or resourcing. If New Zealand is to take an integrated systems approach to preventing and addressing interpersonal violence, this gap needs to be addressed.

> An effective system requires a workforce in which everyone knows
> their role and feels competent and resourced to take action.
> (Joint Venture, 2018, para.4)

My 2022 doctoral study, *Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry,* survivor accounts, along with the work of Safeguarding Children with diverse faith communities highlight that religious institutions do not have a clear sense of their role and are not competent, functioning or resourced to act consistently, safely, and appropriately on addressing interpersonal violence.

Significant issues within religious institutional and community cultures and practices are creating barriers to preventing and addressing violence, they in fact, can perpetuate abuse. These include clericalism, patriarchy, homophobia, the inadequate formation of religious clergy and workers, spiritual abuse, the misinterpretation of scriptures and sacred texts to support violence, a lack of transparency in processes, lack of accountability and an attitude of protecting the institution more than the human dignity of each person. In addition to this, because of religion's institutional standing, religious grooming frequently takes place in a context of unquestioned faith placed in sex offenders by children, parents, and staff[xii]. Without religious institutional changes, religious institutions and related entities will continue to underestimate the prevalence of interpersonal violence, may show indifference to the victims' suffering, or may use ineffective and harmful responses to victims and the perpetrators. Internal and external structural inequalities, discrimination and possible spiritual abuse could also exacerbate coercive control and sense of entrapment for victims and could support and enable acts of violence by perpetrators.

Addressing the Gap

There is a clear need for religious institutions, communities, and congregations to develop and implement safeguarding and child protection frameworks, and to address institutional cultures and practices which can perpetuate violence and abuse. This work needs to ensure that religious communities have an informed understanding of interpersonal violence, including of religious grooming and spiritual abuse as well as cultural and religious overlays. The religious sector needs strong, committed leadership to prioritise safeguarding and child protection, support the establishment of coordinating mechanisms or designated roles which are resourced to oversee and drive the implementation of such a framework and ongoing monitoring and evaluation to ensure the adherence of employees, contractors, and volunteers in positions of trust with children to the relevant policies, procedures, and Codes of Conduct.

In addition to this, religious communities need to have workforce capability and relationships and pathways with government agencies, iwi, external specialist violence services and other relevant community groups to work appropriately and safely to prevent and address interpersonal violence within their institutions and within the wider community.

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[i] Te Tiriti o Waitangi, 1840; The International Covenant on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1972), The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1978), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1978), Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1985), Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1989), and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1993) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) and The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

[ii] Krug, E. G., Dahlberg, L., Mercey, J., Zwi, A., & Lozano, R. (2002). World report on violence and health. World Health Organization.

[iii] Stats NZ, 2018 cited in Egan-Bitran, M. (2022). *"The Gremlin of Silence": Exploring the New Zealand Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian Institutional Responses to Interpersonal Violence.* Thesis for Doctor of Philosophy. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.14445.97769

[iv] Ibid

[v] Stats NZ, n.d., para. 3

[vi] Egan-Bitran, M. (2022). *"The Gremlin of Silence": Exploring the New Zealand Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian Institutional Responses to Interpersonal Violence.* Thesis for Doctor of Philosophy. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.14445.97769

[vii] Egan-Bitran, M. (2022). *"The Gremlin of Silence": Exploring the New Zealand Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian Institutional Responses to Interpersonal Violence.* Thesis for Doctor of Philosophy. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.14445.97769; Knickmeyer, N., Levitt, H., Horne, S. and Bayer, G. (2003). Responding to Mixed Messages and Double Binds: Religious Oriented Coping Strategies of Christian Battered Women. *Journal of Religion & Abuse.* 5(2):29-53; Westernberg, L. (2017). "When she calls for help": Domestic violence in Christian families. *Social Sciences 6:71.*

[viii] Ibid

[ix] Boodoosingh, R., Beres, M. & Tombs, D. (2018). Research briefing: Violence Against women in Samoa. *Women's Studies Journal*, Volume 32, Number ½, pp. 33-56; Ah Siu-Maliko, M. (2016). *Christian faith and family violence: A report for Samoan communities in New Zealand.* Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago. http://hdl.handle.net/10523/7050; Filemoni-Tofaeono, J.A. (2014). *Reweaving the Relational Mat: A Christian Response to Violence Against Women From Oceania.* Routledge.

[x] Nason-Clark, N., Fisher-Townsend, Holtmann, C. & McMullin, S. (2017). Religion and Intimate Partner Violence: Understanding the Challenges and Proposing Solutions. New York, Oxford University Press.

[xi] Abuse in Care: Royal Commission of Inquiry. (2020). Tūwharetoa: Pūrongo o te wā: Interim report. https://www.abuseincare.org.nz/reports/; Abuse in Care: Royal Commission of Inquiry. (2021). He Purapura Ora, He Māra Tipu: From Redress to Puretumu Torowhānui. https://www.abuseincare.org.nz/reports/; Fanslow J., & Robinson, E. (2010). Help-seeking behaviours and reasons help seeing reported by a representative sample of women victims of intimate partner violence in New Zealand. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 25(5), 929–951; Family Violence Death Review Committee. (2020). Sixth report: Te Pūrongo tuaono: Men who use violence Ngā tāne ka whakamahi i te whakarekereke. Health Quality & Safety Commission; Hann, S., & Trewartha, C. (2015). Creating change: Mobilising New Zealand communities to prevent family violence. New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, University of Auckland, New Zealand; The Backbone Collective. (2020). Victim-survivor perspectives on longer-term support after experiencing violence and abuse. A report prepared for the Ministry of Social Development.

[xii] Raine, S. & Kent, S.A. (2019). The grooming of children for sexual abuse in religious settings: Unique characteristics and select case studies. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour. Volume 48, September-October, pp.180-189.*