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|  | **Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions** |

# Briefing paper for LCA leadership

# COVID-19 Ethical Issues – Domestic and Family Violence

## Context

Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) is prevalent across the world and in our communities in Australia. Across the world there were 243 million reported incidents of Domestic Violence last year. In Australia in NSW police respond to a DFV incident every three minutes. 300,000 Australians, mostly women, have experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner in the last 12 months and on average one woman is killed every week by a partner or former partner. DFV is not just physical violence but also about coercive control exercised in many ways to make the intimate partner afraid and prevent them from reaching out for help.

## Impact of COVID-19 and lockdown.

The advent of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown has meant that people who are experiencing violence and abuse by an intimate partner are now with that person 24 hours a day, often without external contact with others. The United Nations is calling the increase in Domestic Violence due to the COVID pandemic, the ‘shadow pandemic’.

In the early days of the lockdown agencies and phone lines reported a 20% increase in inquiries and reports. They reported that they were hearing from people who had not accessed a DFV service before. While stress cannot be seen as a cause of Domestic and Family Violence (many families experience stress and do not resort to violence) it can be a contributing factor to the escalation and intensity of the violence. The economic and educational impact of the COVID-19 shutdowns and confinements have added to the stresses on families through job losses, children learning from home and living in confinement where there are no ways of sharing the emotional load of living in family with others outside the family. Since the early weeks of the lockdown the phonelines and agencies have reported a decrease in referrals and calls.

This decrease was expected for a number of reasons:

* Those experiencing violence cannot get away from the controlling person to seek help
* DFV staff are working from home and cannot do home visits and sight the families for whom they have concerns
* It is far more difficult to actually leave a violent situation when everything is in lockdown.
* Lack of access to case management, financial support and an acute shortage of affordable housing
* Perpetrators of violence are using COVID as another control mechanism. ‘It’s illegal to go out’ or ‘ I have COVID so you and the children cannot see anyone’
* Where schools are closed, teachers who were watching out for signs of violence no longer have safe and private spaces to speak with children
* Helplines are reporting that people are calling late at night when the partner is asleep and using the chat function on the website more regularly

The expectation is that there will be a big increase in demand for services once the lockdown is eased. Agencies are concerned they will not have the resources to respond adequately to this need.

## Ethical Issues

Many of the ethical issues for the church and for community in regard to DFV have not changed but been exacerbated by the pandemic:

1. Speaking out against DFV in all its forms. Violence is not to be excused and help is available. How do we do this more effectively as church and as community?
2. Our responsibility as individuals for the safety of others. How do we support people to become educated about the signs of DFV and know how to respond appropriately? Hopefully the caring for others who are isolated which has been shown during the lockdown will extend to people noticing the signs of DFV in their neighbours, their congregations and their families.
3. The responsibility we have for the most vulnerable in our communities, particularly the communities we know are more at risk of DFV e.g. First Nations people, people with a disability and those from refugee and immigrant communities.
4. Families in stress. The response to the pandemic has highlighted the stress that many families are under through economic and social hardship and has added to that stress for families that may never have experienced it before. How do we as families and as a society shape our members to react to stress and crisis and to recognise and support others who are in crisis in healthy ways.

## Issues for the LCA

1. In this time of not gathering in person for worship, pastors and congregational members could easily miss the warning signs of DFV. Pastors and congregational members need to be reminded of the resources available to equip themselves to notice the signs and hints and how to access help. A new video has just gone up on the Hidden Hurts Healing Hearts website which discusses these issues. Pastors can be encouraged to refer to DFV in their sermons, revisit the handbook and website and their training sessions.
2. The need to examine our public teaching in the area of relationships between men and women and of marriage. We need to prevent our theology being used as spiritual abuse and to ensure that we are not, through our church culture, inadvertently condoning the use of coercive control in families in our church for whom we have responsibility.
3. If LCA members become aware of a Pastor or Church Worker who is using domestic violence, do we have the supports/resources in place for this to be confidentially reported and followed up, in a way that supports those experiencing the violence, and encourages accountability for the person using violence, which may include a clear referral for counselling?
4. Our responsibility to support those who are vulnerable in our communities. What is our role in providing practical community services (Emergency Relief, Homelessness Services, Refugee and Asylum Seekers Services) including DFV response services?
5. Quite a number of LCA members are working on the front line of services and the helplines. We need to be praying for them and supporting them in whatever way we can.

## Sources

The Hidden Hurts Healing Hearts website. The Handbook can be downloaded from there.  
[www.preventDFV.lca.org.au](http://www.preventDFV.lca.org.au)

Survey by Women’s Safety NSW of frontline workers and the impact of COVID-19  
<https://www.womenssafetynsw.org.au/impact/article/new-domestic-violence-survey-shows-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-rise/>

Article about support for those experiencing DV in Ballarat area- interview with Libby Jewson  
<https://www.thecourier.com.au/story/6704028/as-family-violence-risk-increases-services-want-you-to-know-support-is-available/>

Article from The Drum on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the survey of front line workers  
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-27/coronavirus-domestic-family-violence-covid-19-surge/12096988>

7:30 Report ABC 21/05/2020

2019 Personal Safety Survey ABS <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4906.0>

Tips on how to help a friend experiencing DV during the corona virus.  
<https://nnedv.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Library_COVID_helping_a_friend.pdf>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>  
Includes the figure from Hubei that shutdown tripled FV demand.

This is Victoria: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-29/coronavirus-family-violence-surge-in-victoria/12098546>

This is NSW: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-27/coronavirus-domestic-family-violence-covid-19-surge/12096988> Already seeing an escalation

Rick Morton wrote this piece: <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/law-crime/2020/04/04/family-violence-increasing-during-covid-19-lockdown/15859188009641> which has some good reflections about how risk is increased.

“When women speak: domestic violence in Australian churches” in St Mark’s Review – A Journal of Christian Thought and Opinion. No. 243, March 2018.  
<https://stmarks.edu.au/product/when-women-speak-domestic-violence-in-australian-churches/>

Excellent advice in how to be an ally if you think someone is experiencing DFV  
<https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/A4_AllyDoc_web.pdf>

***If you or someone you know is in immediate danger ring 000. If you need to speak to someone 1800RESPECT ( 1800 737 732) will continue to operate during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) health emergency, and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.***