

## AGENDA 6.4

### CTICR: Domestic Violence Taskforce report

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At the LCA General Synod held in 2015, the Church passed a resolution that the CTICR: 'study the Lutheran theological and scriptural understanding of subordination and the role of male headship in marriage and the contextual implications for family violence'.

The CTICR appointed a taskforce to take up this study. The taskforce was set up in March 2017. Since then the group has studied the matter, as laid out by the synod resolution and researched the biblical witness regarding male headship. It has looked at the LCA doctrinal statements in which this matter is addressed or mentioned, read and discussed theological research which presented diverse views and interpretations, and reviewed the available studies of domestic violence in Christian churches, and its possible links with the teaching and practice in the LCA regarding the nature of male headship in marriage and the family. The following report seeks to concisely and accurately summarise our findings.

#### WHAT THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SUBORDINATION AND MALE HEADSHIP IN MARRIAGE HAS TRADITIONALLY OPERATED IN THE LCA?

The LCA has never articulated a clear or consistent public teaching on the specific issue of male headship in marriage and the family. However, indications of theological assumptions about male headship in marriage at various points in our history are given in theological statements on related matters.

DSTO Statements from 1966<sup>1</sup> and 1978<sup>2</sup> assume that women hold a fundamentally subordinate position (the 1966 statement referring specifically to subordination within marriage). A statement from 1984<sup>3</sup> on the role of women in the church demonstrates the LCA was, at that time, opening up to greater involvement of women in the governance of the church.

The LCA's approved rites for marriage have included the use of Ephesians 5:21–33 as a description of the relationship of men and women in Christian marriage. The passage refers to male headship in marriage, modelled on Christ's servant-headship in giving himself up for the church. The current rite includes it as an optional part of the "Foundation and Purpose" section of the order.<sup>4</sup>

#### HOW IS IT UNDERSTOOD TODAY?

In the wake of recent theological research and scholarship, changing social attitudes regarding the roles of men and women, and theological influences from a variety of sources, there is now a diverse range of views of this issue in the LCA. Though there are many different variations on similar positions, and differences of emphasis, they seem to fall into four basic 'streams'.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1966 LCA *Statement on rights of women to vote at meetings of the congregations* (DSTO F1-2) states that women occupy 'a subordinate position in creation' and goes on to contextualise this more precisely: 'This subordination shows itself, as far as the individual woman is concerned, in the marriage relation (Gen 3:16).'

<sup>2</sup> The 1978 LCA statement on *The Role of women in church* (DSTO F3-4) affirms the general teaching that women hold a fundamentally subordinate position in the church, serving, but not fulfilling roles which require independent authoritative leadership. It makes no specific mention of relationships within marriage.

<sup>3</sup> *The Service of Women on Boards and Committees of the Church* (DSTO F5-6) does not mention anything about subordination and headship in marriage, but demonstrates that the LCA was by that time opening up to the greater involvement of women in district and general church bodies.

<sup>4</sup> *Church Rites*, Edited by David Schubert, 1994. Adelaide: Open Book Publishers. 51.

Some hold the view that any biblical teaching on subordination and male headship in marriage is either the result of faulty hermeneutics or is not binding on Christians today because the texts traditionally thought to support male headship (1 Cor 11:3 and Eph 5:23) arose from an inherently abusive patriarchal social system.

Another view is that the pattern of male headship instituted in the old covenant with Israel, in which women were subordinate to male headship in marriage (and more generally) has been superseded by a new covenant in which all such hierarchical notions of structure in the marriage relationship are abolished (Gal 3:28).

Others in the church today point to the continuing validity and authority of the New Testament texts on male headship in marriage (1 Cor 11:3 and Eph 5:23) to show that women are simply subordinate to men in marriage and should submit to the authority of their husbands in everything, since this is the divine order through which God has structured society, marriage and the family.

Another widely held view, and the one on which our taskforce has found most consensus, is based on Eph 5:21-33. In this view, male headship is radically inverted so that its primacy is not one of power or control, but of humble, self-sacrificing service. In this model, the wife's response is indeed to submit to her husband, just as he has first given himself up for her, as described in the opening statement to this passage on marriage in Ephesians 5 - 'Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ' (Eph 5:21). In this 'mutual submission' model (as it is sometimes called) the role of the husband is counter-culturally transformed, in line with Christ's teaching about love of the neighbour in the 'sermon on the mount' (Matt 5-7). In this view of the husband and wife living together in mutual love and submission, the original created relationship is restored, radically changing the whole context of the discussion, moving it from the arena of controlling power to that of Christ-like love and service. It is founded on 'mutual love' rather than a mutual struggle for dominance.

## **HAVE LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF SUBORDINATION AND MALE HEADSHIP CONTRIBUTED TO MALE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE CHURCH?**

We believe that no public theological statement or position of the LCA consciously condones or justifies violence against women.<sup>5</sup> However, some biblical passages and theological understandings have at times been distorted or debased in order to justify the domineering control and violent abuse of women. Part of the established pattern of behaviour common among violent male abusers is that they attempt to justify or legitimise their abusive behaviours by using some quasi-spiritual or quasi-biblical claim.

Domestic violence within churches has received considerable coverage in the past year (see, for instance the articles by Julia Baird and Hayley Gleeson on the churches and domestic violence, published by the ABC in 2017). It is evident that the rate of domestic violence within churches is similar to the rate found in wider society. Several studies have provided evidence that religious language is used to justify violence in intimate relationships.<sup>6</sup> Clergy and church communities may perpetuate abusive behaviour by not challenging it and by not adequately supporting the victims of domestic violence.<sup>7</sup> It must be acknowledged that there is a lack of research on domestic violence in churches, in Australia and elsewhere, which makes drawing further conclusions problematic.

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<sup>5</sup> Violence is defined as any type of abusive behaviour, whether physical, emotional, social, economic or spiritual. 'Domestic violence' refers to a pattern of abusive behaviour in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner.

<sup>6</sup> Knickmeyer Nicole, Levitt Heidi, Horne, Sharon G, Putting on Sunday Best, 2010. The Silencing of Battered Women Within Christian Faith Communities, *Feminism and Psychology*, Sage Publications.  
Westenberg, Leonie, 'When She Calls for Help' – Domestic Violence in Christian Families, 2017, *Social Sciences*, 6, 71.

<sup>7</sup> Wendt, Sarah, 2009, *Domestic Violence in Rural Australia*, The Federation Press, Sydney NSW.

## WHAT ARE THE KEY CONTEXTUAL QUESTIONS AND ISSUES THAT ARISE FROM THIS?

We are aware of the work which is currently being done through the LCA's Domestic Violence Working Group which has built on the thorough and thoughtful pastoral training programs in the past. However as we grappled with the contextual questions that flow on from our discussion of domestic violence, subordination and male headship, it became clear that there were questions and issues that the LCA needs to consider more deeply, in order to understand domestic violence and its impact, as well as provide appropriate pastoral and theological responses.

### a. **Domestic Violence, Marriage Separation and Divorce**

The LCA statement on Marriage and Divorce<sup>8</sup> makes it clear that divorce is possible in certain circumstances, but violence is not mentioned as one of those circumstances. A strong emphasis on marriage being for life, and 'for better or for worse' without mention that violence is one way in which those vows can be broken, may lead those experiencing violence into thinking that there is no alternative but to remain in that relationship.

For couples who are experiencing domestic violence, we need to make sure that the pastoral care provided is appropriate and keeps the safety of all parties central. The LCA would benefit from the introduction of domestic violence training for pastoral workers, which includes an understanding of the cycle of violence, the need for appropriate pastoral responses and specialist referrals.

### b. **Repentance and Forgiveness**

We also recommend that there be further study of the role of repentance and forgiveness in the context of violence in relationships.

It is not appropriate to advise those who are being abused to forgive and return to the violence.

The cycle of violence means that the abuser often seems repentant and remorseful but repeats the abusive cycle, once the relationship resumes.

### c. **Systemic issues**

There are a number of questions which emerge as we consider what public teachings and practice may best serve the LCA as we face the problem of family domestic violence.

As noted above, the LCA has no public statement on the relationship of husband and wife in marriage, and we would observe that there has been a lack of clear biblical teaching on it over the years. This has left something of a 'vacuum' which has, at times, been filled by inadequate or misleading theology and practice. We recognise that the Bishop of the LCA has spoken out strongly against domestic violence, saying that it should never be supported by Christian teachings.<sup>9</sup> Is more needed, however? Would the LCA benefit from a clear theological and pastoral statement renouncing violence in the home and being clear about the servant nature of male headship in marriage?

In what ways might our churches systemically, though unintentionally, cooperate with abusive persons, helping them to justify and perpetuate their abuse?

Is it possible that an all-male clergy may in some way contribute to the conditions that allow domestic violence to continue? For instance, through lack of experience or awareness, could male clergy fail to take domestic violence seriously, or be manipulated

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<sup>8</sup> *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions of the Lutheran Church of Australia* (1980), H7-9.

<sup>9</sup> 'Bishop John Henderson's Message for White Ribbon Day, 25 November 2017' The Lutheran (November 2017) 10-13.

or trapped into colluding with male perpetrators? Is it more difficult for women to disclose domestic violence to their pastor because he is male?

These and other contextual questions regarding the dynamics of relationships in the church around domestic violence continue to challenge us in the LCA.

## **CLOSING STATEMENT**

The taskforce has addressed the matters assigned to us by the synod resolution. In the course of grappling with this task, we have researched and reflected extensively. The distinct and differing theological views represented among the taskforce members have created some challenges for us, but have also sharpened the discussion at key points, enabling us to test the issues with greater focus and precision.

We are, however, united in the one over-riding conclusion that the LCA's public teaching and practice should clearly repudiate and renounce any attempt to justify male violence of any kind in the marriage and family by appealing to male headship of husbands over wives as a Christian teaching.

The Church's teaching needs to centre on the mutual love and service of husband and wife in the home, as the pattern of relationship which reflects the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. We commend to the Church the concerns and contextual implications which arose as we considered the matter, as issues for further research and consideration.

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