

Report on the Round Table Consultation Event

# Understanding domestic violence and religion

Exploring how faith-based organisations  
can be part of the solution

Friday 28th October, in-person at  
St. Athanasius College, Melbourne  
and online.

February 2023

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Social Work Innovation  
Research Living Space







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# Acknowledgements

## Acknowledgement of country

We acknowledge the Traditional owners and Custodians of the lands on which we meet and work. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded. We pay our respects to First Nations Elders past, present and emerging, and affirm our commitment to the ongoing work of reconciliation.

*We recognise the past atrocities against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this land and that Australia was founded on the genocide and dispossession of First Nations people. We acknowledge that colonial structures and policies remain in place today and recognise the ongoing struggles of First Nations people in dismantling those structures.*

Adapted from <https://acij.org.au/about-us/acknowledgement-of-country/>



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This event was presented by the Social Work Innovation Research Living Space (SWIRLS) at Flinders University, University of Divinity, Christian Research Association (CRA), and the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA), with the support of the LCA's Domestic Violence Taskforce.

## The authors of this report would like to thank:

**Lieutenant Star Conliffe**, Salvation Army

**Tania Farha**, CEO, Safe and Equal

**Janette Phelan**, Joint Churches Domestic Violence Prevention Project (Queensland)

**Dr Ruth Powell**, Director, NCLS Research

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# Acronyms and terminology used in the Report

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The report and resources, including recordings of the research presentations, panel discussion and presentation slide decks are available at [flinders.edu.au/swirls/what-we-do/resources](https://flinders.edu.au/swirls/what-we-do/resources)

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## Safety and self-care

This report discusses religion and domestic and family violence. If you find that you are affected by issues raised, please consider and attend to your safety and support needs.

**1800RESPECT** 1800 737 732

**MensLine** 1300 789 978

**Lifeline** 13 11 14

## Domestic violence

Also known as intimate partner violence. As defined in the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* (Commonwealth of Australia 2022, 37):

*“Intimate partner violence, also commonly referred to as ‘domestic violence’, refers to any behaviour within an intimate relationship (including current or past marriages, domestic partnerships, or dates) that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm. This is the most common form of violence against women. Intimate partner violence can also occur outside of a domestic setting, such as in public and between two people who do not live together.”*

## Faith-based organisation (FBO)

The term FBO is inclusive of all religions, faiths, and spiritualities.

## National Plan

Refers to the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* (Commonwealth of Australia 2022).

## Perpetrators

Refers to the individuals who physically, mentally, sexually, socially, financially, and spiritually abuse others.

## Victim-survivors

As described in the National Plan, victim-survivors are:

*“People who have experienced family and domestic violence or gender-based violence. This term is understood to acknowledge the strength and resilience shown by people who have experienced or are currently living with violence.”*

(Commonwealth of Australia 2022, 134)



# Executive Summary

A Roundtable Event titled *Understanding domestic violence and religion* was held on 28 October 2022 to explore the question of how faith-based organisations could be part of the solution to domestic violence in Australia. The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (State of Victoria 2016) recommended that faith leaders and communities establish processes for examining responses and recovery to domestic violence. Many FBOs have embarked on this recommendation to raise awareness in congregations, schools, and other institutions of the church, as well as training, identifying and developing resources, and searching for best practice to support and respond to both victims-survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence.

The Roundtable Event was created to bring interested stakeholders together to talk; share ideas about domestic violence policies, services, and other relevant resources; and enable the possibilities of further work with faith communities. Eighty-one people attended.

Research presentations and panel discussions elicited the following **key messages**:

- Gender inequality to dynamics of abuse cannot be ignored, and the gendered leadership hierarchies and norms within religion need to come under scrutiny if domestic violence is to be tackled.
- Theological determinations and arguments for truths, based on scriptural interpretation that restrain gender equality, need further recognition to increase support for safe and peaceful intimate partner relations.
- FBOs play a role in fulfilling people’s needs, after separation, as a contribution to them rebuilding and recovering life that is safe, and for them to have material provision; to be in relationships of care, empathy, and acceptance; to have an identity; and to have a spiritual life and relationship with God.
- Intersectionality and diversity in communities is important in understanding domestic violence – faith communities are diverse in terms of theological belief and capacity.
- Community development approaches have potential to build trust and respect between local FBOs and specialist/sector domestic violence services – and bring specialist knowledges together.

Roundtable discussions elicited the following **recommendations**:

- Training for faith leaders to consider:
  - safety and risk, self-care, and ongoing support.
  - awareness of gender, domestic violence, and theology, so outcomes can support prevention, response, recovery, and equality.
- Specialist domestic violence services to partner with FBOs to attend to intersectional considerations in family lives including:
  - Building specific FBO policies and procedures to enable pathways for faith leaders to access domestic violence expertise and ongoing training and education regarding best practices.
  - Developing communities of practice, both within and between FBOs and domestic violence specialist services, with a view to sharing expertise, knowledge, and resources to further develop capacity to prevent and respond to domestic violence.
- The National Plan and associated action plan developments to be inclusive of FBOs.

There is much potential for FBOs and communities to be part of prevention and response initiatives to tackle domestic violence because religion influences leaders and congregations, as well as men and women, in ideas about gender and family values, and hence, plays a powerful role in development of family life and intimate partner relations.

# Background

Faith and religious institutions have been recognised as important places for individuals and families, in seeking help and counselling, to improve their psychological and mental health wellbeing. Studies have also established how spirituality and religion help victim-survivors of domestic violence recover from its impacts and related trauma, and have explored understandings and responses by religious leaders (Turhan, 2022). In comparison, few studies have examined how faith, religion, and spirituality influence men's perpetration of domestic violence. There are potentially many reasons for this, including the diversity of religion and fear on the part of researchers of misunderstanding beliefs and practices, and the personal nature of spirituality (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015). Perhaps more difficult to name is the wider, gendered, political context of gender inequality that is present in leadership hierarchies and norms within religion (Ogden, 2022).

Domestic violence is a serious and widespread problem internationally and in Australia. *The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032* recognises that one in three women has experienced physical violence since the age of 15, and one in five has experienced sexual violence, and that on average, a woman is killed by an intimate partner every ten days with rates of violence being even higher for certain groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, 95% of people who have experienced physical or sexual violence name a man as the perpetrator of at least one incident of violence and around four in five family and domestic violence offenders are men<sup>2</sup>.

The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) recommended that faith leaders and communities establish processes for examining the ways in which they currently respond to domestic violence in their communities and explore practices of prevention or reporting of, or recovery from, domestic violence (Pepper & Powell, 2022). Just prior to this time, the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) established the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence Campaign. The establishment of the campaign was requested by the 2015 General Convention of Synod, the highest decision-making body in the LCA. The campaign



involves raising awareness in congregations, schools, and other institutions of the church, as well as training, research, identifying and developing resources, and recommending and implementing specific actions to support and respond to both victim-survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence. The campaign was titled *Hidden Hurts Healing Hearts* and a Taskforce was established in 2017. The campaign is overseen by a working group of people – known as the Taskforce – who have knowledge and expertise in the areas of support to victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. Understanding women's experiences is vital in domestic violence research, and much of what is known about domestic violence and religion comes from women's stories. Women have long navigated, survived, and participated in research so that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can seek to understand and combat domestic violence; men who use violence are, by contrast, largely invisible. Men's accounts and talk of violence are rarely analysed in research, therefore, in

<sup>1</sup> [dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/11\\_2022/national\\_plan\\_to\\_end\\_violence\\_against\\_women\\_and\\_children\\_2022-2032.pdf](https://dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/11_2022/national_plan_to_end_violence_against_women_and_children_2022-2032.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.





2019, the Taskforce partnered with Professor Sarah Wendt and Professor Wendy Mayer and won an Australian Research Council Grant (PROJECT ID: LP190100269) to explore how religious beliefs and practices shaped men's perpetration of domestic violence.

As challenging as this endeavor seemed, this research was embarked upon for several reasons:

- The Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) wants to reduce the incidence and effects of domestic violence in the church.
- Faith and religious communities want to talk about male domination and control and begin a re-examination of male attitudes to women.
- Church communities want to re-examine the ways in which they provide support to victim-survivors of abuse and challenge the values and behaviours of those who perpetrate it.

A range of dissemination strategies are underway at the time of writing this report including publications within academic peer-reviewed journals and a research monograph to share the findings of this research. The research also seized on the opportunity to communicate the findings, not only to the LCA in the form of reports, but also to relevant state and federal government departments and other denominations. This report is an example of translation to policy and practice contexts that resulted as an outcome from a National Roundtable.

# Introduction: The Roundtable

The rationale for the *Roundtable Consultation Event – Understanding domestic violence and religion: Exploring how faith-based organisations can be part of the solution* originated as an outcome sought from the Australian Research Council Grant (PROJECT ID: LP190100269), titled *Religion and domestic violence: exploring men’s perpetration*<sup>1</sup>. The scope of this research addresses the gap in knowledge about the perpetration of spiritual abuse as a form of domestic violence and considers how men understand their use of violence towards women in intimate partner relationships in the context of their Christian beliefs and practices, how they seek help within their church, and also how the (Lutheran) church responds to domestic violence.

Recognising gaps in research and the LCA’s support for investing in this research, as well as its church-wide campaign to prevent domestic violence, led to the researchers developing an initiative inviting a wide range of participants to discuss the relationship between religion and domestic violence, faith-based initiatives underway to support prevention, response, and recovery, and to share ideas and identify opportunities for future supports, initiatives, and policy.

This event was presented by the Social Work Innovation Research Living Space (SWIRLS) at Flinders University, the University of Divinity, and the Christian Research Association with the support of the Lutheran Church of Australia’s Domestic Violence Taskforce. It was a national gathering to share information about initiatives and research, demonstrating how churches and faith communities in Australia are working to prevent and respond to domestic violence. The purpose and opportunity of this gathering was to promote inter-faith awareness of how religious organisations and communities are raising awareness about domestic violence, and how they understand their role in responding and providing support to congregations and affected individuals – victim-survivors and perpetrators of violence. The event supported sharing ideas about how domestic violence policies, services, and other relevant resources can further inform work with faith communities.

In this space, there are difficult conversations and reflections in the call for renewed knowledges, practices and initiatives that will promote safety and reduce the risk of spiritual abuse and domestic violence. As religious institutions commit to addressing domestic violence, this gathering sought to acknowledge the work being done to transform church and faith-community responses, and ensure churches and faith settings are safe spaces, and support accountability and healing.

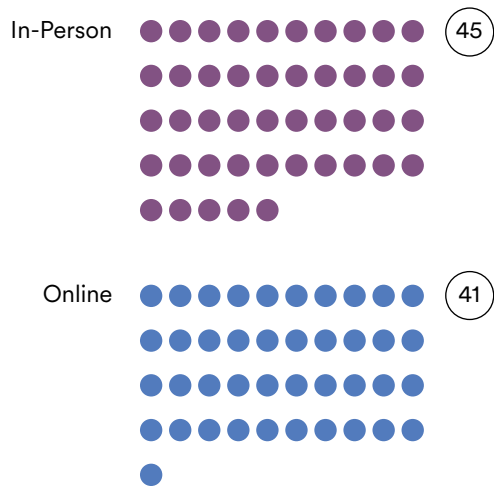
It is timely to bring together church and faith communities to share information about their initiatives because:

- Churches and faith-communities are investing in research to understand and address domestic violence.
- Churches and faith communities are seeking to understand practices and instruction that have detrimentally impacted on and risked victim-survivor safety.
- The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence has recommendations for faith-communities (adopted by the Victorian Government) – the role of faith-communities is recognised as significant in supporting (or constraining) individuals and faith community members to understand, recognise and respond to domestic violence, and support safety.
- Churches and faith communities can support victim-survivors and perpetrator accountability and healing.

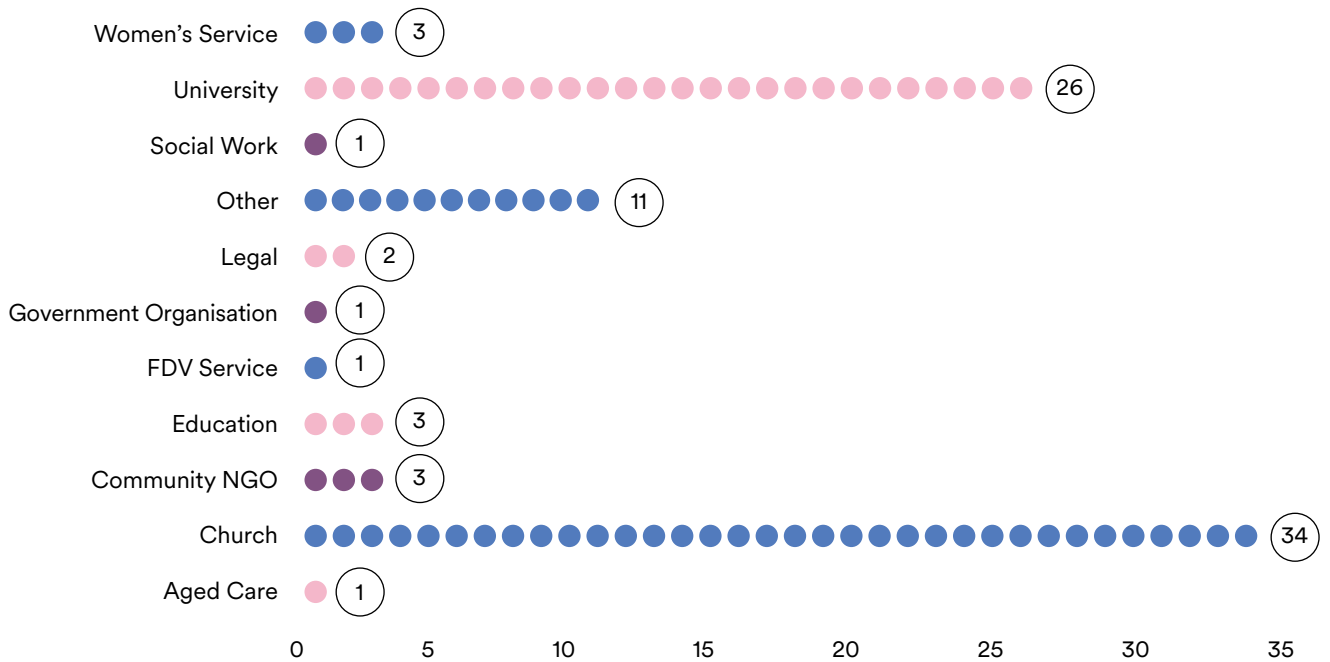
There was an open invitation to attend the free event. To support attendance, the event was held in-person in Melbourne and online. In total, 81 people attended the event. As the graphs show, most attendees were from the university and church sectors, and the ratio of in-person and online attendance was similar.

1 More information about the Religion and domestic violence: exploring men’s perpetration research project can be found at [flinders.edu.au/swirls/partnerships-and-projects](http://flinders.edu.au/swirls/partnerships-and-projects)

## Attendance Type



## Sector Representation



# Roundtable Presentations

The day included an introduction by Professor Wendy Mayer (University of Divinity), followed by two presentations of research.

Professor Sarah Wendt and Dr Josephine Clarke from Flinders University shared preliminary findings from interviews with pastors and the analysis was of key theological journal articles, policy, and publicly available documents of the LCA. The key messages elicited from their presentation included several themes. First, when there are biological and essentialist ideas of man and woman together with historical and cultural privileges to constructions of masculinity, domestic violence becomes viewed as not existing or inevitable in religious families, or representative of the natural order whereby a man is being a man. This makes it difficult to name and identify domestic violence in religious contexts. Entitlement is a concept that also needs exploration as it too makes it difficult to name and identify domestic violence because as it is implied, entitlement allows rights-claim, which is used by men authorising and justifying controlling behaviour and/or violent action in religious contexts. Men who perpetrate domestic violence feel entitled to make claims on their partner, and entitlement reflects an enduring gender pattern. The consequences of such gendered constructions and entitlement are that gendered discourses enable men, individually and collectively in religion, to determine what does and does not count as domestic violence. This theme supports the argument that gender inequality to dynamics of

abuse cannot be ignored, and the gendered leadership hierarchies and norms within religion need to come under scrutiny if domestic violence is to be tackled.

Second, theological drivers of religious-based gender and social norms that discriminate against women limit equality in gender relations through discourses and practices. This 'othering' of women normalises and condones unequal relations between women and men in intimate relationships. Hence, while the LCA is reflective as it increases its capacity to challenge domestic violence within its religious community, and offer support to both victim-survivors and perpetrators of violence, the intersection of its domestic violence campaign with religious organising practice that limits opportunities for women, and theological determinations and arguments for truths based on scriptural interpretation that restrain gender equality, need further recognition to increase support for safe and peaceful intimate partner relations. There is the opportunity for the LCA to revise its theological priorities and practices throughout the church, to support the campaign's intent but also, extend the LCA's capacity to promote safety and equality (for – but not limited to – women and men; in relationships, families, congregations, workplaces) and address current injustices based on gender.

Dr Ruth Powell, Director at National Church Life Survey (NCLS) Research and Associate Professor and Research Fellow at Charles Sturt University, shared findings from



the National Anglican Family Violence Project. She highlighted that the prevalence of domestic violence among Anglicans and specifically church-attending Anglicans was the same or higher than in the wider Australian community. The key messages from the study also included several themes that were like Wendt and Clarke's study above. First, faith and church communities have been shown to both assist and hinder those who are experiencing domestic violence as although unintended, Christian teachings sometimes contribute to and potentially amplify situations of domestic violence. Second, perpetrators misuse Christian teachings and positional power, but when churches acknowledge that domestic violence happens, it can help victim-survivors, and churches are more able to respond when victim-survivors are ready. Third, at their best, churches play a role in fulfilling the following needs, after separation, as a contribution to rebuilding and recovering life: to be safe; to have material provision; to be in relationships of care, empathy, and acceptance; to have an identity; and to have a spiritual life and relationship with God.

Third, Professor Sarah Wendt facilitated a panel discussion with the following attendees:

- **Lieutenant Star Conliffe**, Salvation Army Officer
- **Associate Professor Cathy Vaughan**, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health
- **Tania Farha**, CEO, Safe and Equal
- **Janette Phelan**, Joint Churches Domestic Violence Prevention Project (Queensland)

The panel discussion responded to the following questions:

1. Tell us a little about your work – and how you have come to this point of looking at domestic violence and the role of faith based-organisations (FBO).
2. What do you think is the main challenge that 'we' need to name and consider in the space of religion and domestic violence?
3. What have you learned from your work – that would enable collaboration between FBOs and non-FBOs?

The key messages from the panel discussion were also like the research presentations. Again, the theme that silence is often present in faith and church organisations when it comes to talking about and understanding domestic violence was discussed because talking about gender inequality is challenging in religious contexts. The abuse of power and relationship with power is difficult for religious communities to acknowledge and name, particularly how power is used to protect clergy and perpetrators. Christianity has historically used scripture to collude with those who use violence, and many people and leaders don't believe domestic violence is present in their congregations. Hence, a theology that subjugates women culturally and structurally will continue to enable domestic violence. For example, language of accountability of perpetrators can be difficult within traditional gender relations, marriage, and forgiveness discourses. Second, intersectionality and diversity in religious communities is important to acknowledge in understanding violence against women in terms of theological belief and capacity. Religious practices are diverse, hence church networks can both assist and hinder those who are experiencing domestic violence – that is, victim-survivors report dual experiences of harm and healing when seeking support. Third, community development approaches have potential to build trust and respect between local FBO and specialist/sector domestic violence services to further enable a safe and healing experience for victim-survivors as they bring specialist knowledges together. Finally, the panel raised a theme that has not been considered in previous research and that is reflections on theology and domestic violence requires safe environments for religious leaders. Panel members shared knowledge that clergy have experienced anxiety related to caring for and responding to domestic violence in their congregations as well as moral injury – a point that needs further research.

Recordings of the research presentations and panel discussions are available to view at [finders.edu.au/swirls/what-we-do/resources](https://finders.edu.au/swirls/what-we-do/resources) – under the 'Forums, webinars and podcasts' section.



# Roundtable Discussions

The afternoon was dedicated to roundtable discussions of five questions (in-person and online). The day was finalised by a rapid theme summary of these discussions.

The five questions were developed to guide attendees in sharing information, learnings, and their expertise in relation to questions relevant to supporting the capacity of FBOs and communities to address domestic violence. Participants were asked to discuss and respond to the following questions:

1. What is the role of faith leaders and providers of pastoral or spiritual care when responding to domestic and family violence?
2. How can safe practices be supported within faith-based communities (examples of current practice)?
3. How can faith-based communities and specialist domestic violence services work collaboratively together?
4. What key messages could be included in the National Plan that would enable the inclusion of faith-based communities and organisations?
5. How would we know that faith-based organisations (FBOs) have made a difference?

In determining the questions, consideration was given to supporting conversations about the role of faith leaders in responding to domestic violence, as well as eliciting insights into current practices – and suggested practices – that support safety. Question three aimed to address the critically important issue of how FBOs and specialist domestic violence services interact and work together. Through these questions, the organisers asked participants about the role of FBOs – and their capacity and responsibilities – in supporting domestic violence identification, prevention, and response, as well as providing ongoing pastoral and spiritual support to those affected.

At the time of organising this event, the Australian *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2023* was being developed (the final Plan was released in October 2022). It was decided to include a question, specifically referencing the National Plan and asking attendees for their ideas about how the Plan can include and support faith-based communities to address domestic violence. This question was also included with a view to using this report to provide feedback to the various Ministers signatory to the National Plan and any associated future action plans.

The last question decided upon was to ask participants to reflect on how a positive difference can be understood. The organisers reflected that this is a difficult question as the role of FBOs may not necessarily be clarified, as the development of a FBO's capacity to engage with domestic violence is currently underway. The organisers hoped the question would add to conversations about the role of FBOs specifically and support a range of insights into how making a difference with a faith-lens can be supported and how it may inform evaluative indicators.

All discussion groups were asked to nominate a scribe and document the key points raised in roundtable discussions of the five questions. At the end of the session, all scribe notes were collected with a view to informing a summary at the end of the day, and thereafter, this report. A thematic analysis was undertaken of all the information gathered from the scribe notes. Each question and the key issues and themes raised from roundtable conversations are presented below.

# Question 1

## What is the role of faith leaders and providers of pastoral or spiritual care when responding to domestic and family violence?

A key theme raised before participants explored more deeply the specific five questions was the appeal for faith leaders to be open to the reality of domestic violence – that is, to recognise and understand that domestic violence exists in congregations and communities. This broad request to be open to the reality of domestic violence was an important steppingstone to ensuring the potential of a safe disclosure to faith leaders, and further expressing belief and concern for women and children who seek support.

“ Listening, trust, confidentiality – acknowledge that domestic violence is a problem and non-judgmental responses are essential.

“ Role of faith leader to have the uncomfortable conversation.

To answer more specifically the role of faith leaders when responding to domestic violence, participants agreed it was to suspend any judgement and to focus on safety. This involved being able to make an assessment and understand how best to support women and children's safety. To enable safety, it was recommended that faith leaders learn how to recognise and ask about domestic violence, including coercive control, and consider any potential bias on their part in responding to domestic violence and risk. Through understanding the tactics of perpetrators and the forms that power and control take, faith leaders then had the potential to also understand the impacts and trauma of domestic violence on families and communities.

The role of faith leaders is to be 'safe aware' and 'safe to approach'. It was discussed that to fulfill these roles it required faith leaders to know their capacity and

limitations, as well as where to get help and advice beyond their church or organisation. More specifically, the strength of receiving a response from a faith leader was the potential for spiritual and theological guidance for those with religious and spiritual identities. However, participants also wanted faith leaders to have a strong understanding of their own theological responses and the power they exercise in the lives of parishioners seeking support and guidance. In targeting education and training needs, it was recommended to include information about specialist domestic violence services and various forms of domestic violence, as well as encourage safe exploration and debate regarding interpretations of theological teachings.

“ Faith leaders need to understand their own theological response to domestic violence/relationships/power, and proactively communicate this to the faith community, educating around relationships and domestic violence through balanced biblical preaching and theology.

“ Educate self theologically [in] how to argue against religious texts [which] perpetrators use to justify their behaviours/selves.



Many participants discussed the theological role of faith leaders and the importance of their interpretation and teachings of intimate relationships, marriage, and use of violence, and how these can be used carefully and safely to respond to domestic violence. However, to enable this potential, it was also recommended that to be able to prioritise and support the safety of women and children, training or education possibilities would need to include:

- Exploration of understanding safety and risk.
- Creating and supporting safe spaces to disclose and respond to domestic violence.
- Partnering with the domestic violence specialist service system to support victim-survivors and their safety.
- Avoiding collusion with perpetrators of violence and understanding referral options for perpetrators.

“ Faith leaders to be the conduit to the services.

“ Not trying to deal with issues alone, seeking support, professional supervision.

Providing training opportunities to faith leaders was identified as imperative to supporting faith leader capacity to recognise and respond to domestic violence with confidence. Some conversations also noted the opportunity for volunteers and church staff to be trained. These conversations recognised the importance of providing training opportunities, which, in turn, assist role clarification and building confidence to respond to domestic violence. It was also noted secular policies could assist faith leaders in responding to perpetrators of violence. Moreover, policies can clarify responding to children and mandatory reporting requirements.

“ Having clarity around roles – that all staff, including volunteers, have training around the issue and how to respond. To understand identifying features of DFV, associated risks, and how to respond appropriately. Proper training means pastors can be confident with their response ... and are given the appropriate vocabulary to have these conversations.

“ As a leader in a local congregation, if you are in a denomination where there isn't any scaffolding/policies to support you, it becomes very difficult. How to know how to have that conversation.

Another theme that arose from the discussions of Question 1 related to addressing culture change. 'Culture' broadly referred to values, principles and beliefs that informed ideas about gender relations, and the role of faith leaders was considered pivotal in leading change to address gender inequalities in faith communities. Conversations also considered the importance of recognising the diversity of faith-based communities which are also culturally and linguistically diverse. Hence, guidance by faith leaders to manage contestations between interpretations of culture, theology and spirituality was considered important.

“ Being prepared to address the gender drivers.

“ Support to increasing the diversity of people involved in leadership roles.

“ Be aware of cultural difference to enable culturally informed responses.

These discussions indicated the role of faith communities in supporting the primary prevention of domestic violence, for example, through messaging (e.g. stories, posters within the community), but also through worship and prayer. The latter includes attention to the use of language and scripture and support for “reframing scripture” with respect to preventing and addressing violence against women.

“ Mention domestic violence in preaching/sermons.

“ Teach and preach on the difficult scriptural texts and set the culture.

“ Speak against family violence from a position of power.

Conversations also noted that faith leaders occupy an influential position, and hence, can support increasing faith community capacity to address and reduce domestic violence, as well as support individual victim-survivor safety and respond to their specific pastoral/spiritual needs. The role of faith leaders was to provide “pastoral and spiritual support” to people experiencing and recovering from domestic violence, which many viewed as vital in that they can directly talk to victim-survivors about their faith needs. Faith leaders can prioritise and support safety and address spiritual abuse in conversations.

“ Provide faith-specific support and giving permission to leave.

“ Talk to women about their faith journey and the spiritual aspects of her recovery. Specifically address questions of blame, shame – validation that this is abuse and not their role to ‘fix’ their marriage or remain in the marriage when it is unsafe. Help to understand the place of forgiveness and covenant as a two-way relationship etc as Ruth was discussing.



## Question 2

### How can safe practices be supported within faith-based communities (examples of current practice)

Themes identified from discussions in response to Question 1 continued and participants elaborated on the point that safe practices and responding to victim-survivors and perpetrators will be supported by further developments to promote a culture of safe disclosure. This will be supported by faith leaders modelling safe behaviours, and together with communities, establishing a safe environment to enable disclosure. It will also encourage training and professional development.

- “ Build a culture of safety.
- “ Create safe spaces.
- “ Supporting safe practices.
- “ Set up community expectations to be a safe community.
- “ Trauma-informed preaching/practice.
- “ Churches have compromised the safety of the victim.

Discussions also drew attention to acknowledging and supporting diversity in faith-based communities. For example, participants talked about addressing domestic violence in ways that are responsive to First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Some participants also raised the discussion that faith-based communities and practices also need to be LGBTQI+ friendly and these considerations be incorporated into training.

To create safe practices within faith-based communities, blame and forgiveness were also themes that arose during discussions. Participants identified that faith leaders can play a central and important role in interpretations of blame and forgiveness as they relate to victim-survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence. For example, both faith-based communities and leaders can provide opportunities for positive messages and teachings that can open up conversations about domestic violence and counter blame that is commonly felt by victim-survivors and used as a tactic of perpetrators, as well as alleviate ‘pressure’ to forgive perpetrators. They can also share conversations, such as through sermons, that support courage and assertiveness in messaging – for example, both in relation to Jesus and justice. Within this theme was discussion about how there are multiple ways to read religious texts. This theme returns to the important point about enabling a culture to support equality and safety, through teachings and statements.

- “ Deal with concepts – i.e. forgiveness.
- “ Use scripture to define healthy relationships.
- “ Facilitate conversations between leaders and community
  - Imam and women community leaders
  - Priests and parishioners.

“ Specific teachings to counter damaging beliefs that perpetuate power imbalance and violence.

“ Statements about equality and the culture of the church itself as being one that values members and their gifts equally.

These quotes again show that participants suggested that faith leaders have a significant role in sharing theology teachings to create safe environments for victim-survivors and to counteract harmful messaging of gender inequality.

Many participants thought there was much opportunity for collaboration between the care work of FBOs and domestic violence specialist services because this would ensure leaders and organisations offer support from an evidence base in responding to victim-survivors and perpetrators of violence that enables safety and understandings of risk, as well as respect for families' religious identities which shape their experiences.

“ Clear church policies re managing domestic and family violence – including ongoing training, drawing on best practice knowledges etc, and working with specialist services esp. re safety needs and decision-making – and develop confidence in using those policies. (This means ministers aren't the only ones dealing with a situation, even in a smaller church.)

Participants nominated the importance of policies and procedures in responding to domestic violence as these will enable training and education opportunities, as well as understanding roles and supports available, and ultimately, supporting safety.

Conversations about specific training dominated discussions. As one scribe noted, “*Training, training, training,*” emphasising how participants overwhelmingly identified the importance of faith-based communities and organisations receiving education and training in domestic violence matters. Further, bystander training was also nominated. Training was identified as of upmost importance for faith leaders, but also it was recognised that training across communities at all levels will be useful. Similar to discussions in response to Question 1, the matter of accessing domestic violence specialists and ‘ongoing learning’ was identified as important. Other points made focused on what not to do – do not push couple counselling nor pressure victims, which many participants thought was a consequence of not understanding gender, power and control in domestic violence.



“ Train people to be pastoral supports for victim-survivors.

“ Don't be silent about it.

“ Call [out] inappropriate behaviour.

“ Be active bystanders – continued learning and teaching.

There were several mentions of the usefulness of identifying champions in faith communities to support their capacity to address domestic violence, but they also needed to be supported with training.

“ When men ‘champion’ responding to/ending DV, they acknowledge what women have taught them.

“ Family violence officer/ champion – designated and recognised.

“ Involve women pastoral staff intentionally in working with women who have experienced the violence.

Communities of practice were also identified as an opportunity for faith-based communities to further develop safety – within a community, but also the opportunity for the sharing of practices and resources between faiths.

“ Develop communities of practice so supporters can support each other.

“ Share practice between faiths.

“ Partnership with peak bodies.

“ Option for national leadership and sharing.

Supporting prevention was also identified as necessary to FBO work to address domestic violence, specifically faith leaders playing a central role in addressing gender inequality drivers that contribute to domestic violence.

“ Start with prevention ... this equips people to deal with disclosures when they are revealed.

“ A multi-pronged approach to education to change attitudes and build a culture of safety.

Conversations also identified how resourcing needs to be considered – at all levels, and to support faith communities, leaders, and organisations to enhance their capacity to prevent and respond to domestic violence – that is specific to religious contexts. Roundtable participants also shared their expertise and knowledge regarding examples of practices, training, resources and initiatives already underway in several faith communities

and organisations. Many faith-based communities are already engaged in initiatives to address and prevent domestic violence. Where information has been located, these are listed at the end of the report under the ‘Resources, initiatives and research’ heading. Participants also suggested making relevant research accessible and connecting with collaborations already established to support children’s safety.







# Question 3

## How can faith-based communities and specialist domestic and family violence services work collaboratively together?

Roundtable discussions affirmed the key theme that collaboration between faith leaders, faith-based communities and specialist domestic violence services is critically important. Domestic violence services bring decades of evidence-based knowledge to understand and respond to violence against women and their children – that is safe and ethical. Faith-based leaders and communities bring ecclesiastical beliefs and practices in the analysis of domestic violence experiences – that is spiritual and personal. Discourses of gender and family life and how they are intertwined with spiritual life is complex, and faith leaders bring this intimate knowledge to identity.

It is acknowledged that it will take time to build relationships, trust, and networks, as well as deconstruct dominant assumptions about faith-based leaders and communities and the specialist domestic violence sector. First, the assumptions of endless capacity and provision of support by specialist domestic violence agencies need to be recognised. In fact, there is very little research that systematically maps and analyses the extent of the services provided by this specialist sector. The experiences and complexity of service provision and the nature of women's shelter work in Australia are largely unknown to those who are not directly involved in running these services, such as: funders, government, policymakers, and academic scholars. The current model of a women's shelter typically includes crisis and transitional accommodation for women and their children as the focus of practice. However, as not-for-profit organisations, they are struggling with having frequent short-term competitive funding cycles from state and federal governments (Wendt, Chung, Elder, Hendrick, & Hartwig, 2017), adapting to changes in workforce composition (Wendt, Natalier, Seymour, King, & Macaitis, 2020), attempting to meet the needs of diverse groups of women (Indigenous, ethnicity, disability, age, rural, same sex) with complex family lives including drug and alcohol addiction, mental health challenges, and poverty (Putt, Holder, & O'Leary, 2017), and are grappling to maintain the wellbeing of staff who are largely female and on insecure, part-time contracts

(Cortis, Seymour, Natalier, & Wendt, 2020). Training, and outreach counselling are aspects of domestic violence work that have been eroded over time, but are needed to bridge relationships with local communities, such as faith-based communities – hence will require long-term investment and sustainability.

Second, the assumptions regarding the capacity to respond to and the understanding of domestic violence in faith-based communities also need to be discussed. Gender inequality is present within domestic violence relationships, and more broadly, in religious contexts, which cannot be ignored. Research has shown many clergy are not equipped to harness the beliefs and practices of their religious traditions to help an abuser, and clergy often feel caught between the demands of their religious traditions to discourage divorce and face homes in which safety and peace do not exist (Nason-Clark, Fisher-Townsend, Holtmann, & McMullin, 2018). On the other hand, some studies have shown that repentance, remorse, altered behaviour and forgiveness can be an important spiritual strategy for change for men who use violence. However, it is common for men to want their circumstances to change but to not want to alter their own religious thinking or behaviour (Nason-Clark, Fisher-Townsend, Holtmann, & McMullin, 2018). Furthermore, studies have shown that religious practices and beliefs can be a significant source of strength for achieving resilience in the face of domestic violence and for contributing towards men's healing after leaving a violent relationship (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015).

Despite the complex terrain that surrounds the funding of domestic violence service provision and the complex role of religion in shaping gender relations and domestic violence, participants believed there was great potential for collaboration, where safety and risk could be better understood, and in highlighting the importance of faith in family life.

“ to that work. Willingness to collaborate.

“ Recognition and regard for the services each provide.

“ ... can be intentional in their collaborations with the specialist services and be attuned to referral needs. Thus, need specific policies to guide collaboration and referrals re provision of safety.

“ Build bridge given past abuses.

“ DFV risk-assessments that include aspects of faith/spirituality; see it as an assistance rather than cause.

The willingness to work together emphasised the possibilities of collaboration and the opportunities churches and FBOs can offer – from individuals experiencing DFV and their recovery, to communities in connecting people, engaging them in prevention and advocacy initiatives, and supporting specialist services.

“ Understand that faith is a key factor of identity.

“ Ask local service what they need.

“ Church is interested – let [the] organisation know [they] want change.

“ Encouraging people to continue their relationship with their faith community, if it is a safe space for them to stay in.

“ Preventing spiritual abuse.

There was also specific mention of opportunities that may exist in relation to rural contexts when there are limited or gaps in domestic violence services – but also taking into the consideration the assumptions outlined above.

“ Gap-filling for agencies at local level and being open to doing that.

## Question 4

What key messages could be included in the National Plan that would enable the inclusion of faith-based communities and organisations?

Participants were asked to consider this question with a view to collating responses to provide feedback to the national policy process. The first key theme for the National Plan to further consider was that religion needs to be part of acknowledging diversity.

A second and related theme was that faith and religion is significant for many people throughout their lives. Religion – and faith communities – offer spiritual and social support.

“ Diversity and culture include religion – don’t shy away from it; religion needs to be considered within people’s lives. Particularly when considering First Nations people and new Australians and their cultural diversity.

“ People’s spiritual life matters in all phases of life especially people in crisis.

“ Faith and religion ARE factors in DFV; the role of faith in helping people to deal with DFV.



There were many descriptions of how faith-based communities and organisations support individuals and families, and in many geographic localities. Regarding the latter point there were further discussions about how FBOs and communities may offer support to people in rural and remote locations and in the context of localities with minimal or no relevant service provision. These conversations also highlighted the unique aspects to how faith and faith communities offer support and how they may feature, specifically supporting domestic violence victim-survivors. Faith communities, it was highlighted, were also thought to be unique in that they are multi-generational and involve whole families; they are an accessible group with skills, resources, and influence.

“ Christian churches are one of the few organisations left that have a presence in the majority of towns across Australia. The church is the last institution to shut.

“ Recognising faith-based community as their capacity to provide foundational support to come through when there is a lack of services or when the provision of speciality services concludes.

“ Churches build connections.

“ Faith-based communities will contribute to changing attitudes to DFV and raising awareness through proactive education and theological reflection and living out the gospel.

The issue of how FBOs and communities can provide support going forward was widely discussed and there were several aspects to this key consideration in discussions. The first point participants made was the emphasis on a strengths-based approach to understanding the role of religion in prevention, response, and recovery. With appropriate training, education, and support, some argued, FBOs can contribute to prevention and long-term support that often specialist agencies do not have the capacity to attend to over time and in the context of crisis work.

“ Faith community is well-positioned to provide the long-term support that victim-survivors need.

“ FBC leaders can be advocates and agents for change.

“ Churches, at their best, are a community, so can counteract isolation.

Integral to this discussion was the issue of how religion has been associated with domestic violence, recognising detrimental practices enabling domestic violence, but at the same time recognising the transition and interest of faith communities committed to addressing domestic violence, offering supports and safety, and being adequately resourced to do so. In summary, this can be described as the effort to recognise and address FBOs being viewed as not only part of the wider problem in which gender power relations get played out, but going forward, to support the momentum for FBOs to be part of the solution.

“ The need to recognise within churches colonisation, power and control in the context of First Nations people.

“ Faith leaders taking responsibility for the way sacred texts have been used to oppress women and excuse abuse.

“ Focus on faith-based communities in their capacity to assist rather than contribute to the issue.

To return to the matter of how FBOs and communities may support victim-survivors and perpetrators, discussions revealed the complexity of support and safety considerations, as well as opportunities for collaboration with specialist DFV services – all matters for the National Plan to consider. The significance of the role of FBOs and communities was highlighted when it was recognised that faith-based communities may be where a person first discloses experiencing domestic violence. Further, they can be communities where both victims and perpetrators of abuse may be members, and hence, collaboration is required to support safety and manage risk. Finally, discussions emphasised the critical role of faith and faith-based community in recovery for people of faith.

“ Recognition of the importance of a faith-based lens for domestic and family violence recovery.

These themes in the conversations connected to considerations regarding how FBOs can have input into how the plan is operationalised. For example, materials, resources and policy developed require inclusion of religion, as well as assessing for risk and addressing how faith is incorporated into legal responses to domestic violence.

“ Somehow encourage training within churches. Have a package of resources and explanation of how you roll it out within a church/faith community.

“ Recognition of the need for integrated and collaborative service provision to religious people who have experienced domestic and family violence which incorporates FBOs within that service provision, along with specialist DFV services.

# Question 5

## How would we know that faith-based organisations have made a difference?

As previously noted in the introduction to this report, we acknowledge this was a difficult question to consider. However, we aimed to use this question to ascertain what and how change might be constructed when considering the role of FBOs in tackling domestic violence.

Discussion of this question can be summarised by referencing several key themes. First, conversations discussed a difference can be ascertained if there is a decrease in domestic violence statistics in the community and specifically in FBOs. However, it was noted there can be an increase in statistics when there is an increase in safety awareness.

“ When the stats show there is a lower incidence.

It was also suggested that there needs to be more research into the prevalence of domestic violence in FBOs and communities to accurately understand lower rates. However, others also suggested that where there are existing studies and data sets that measure domestic violence prevalence and incidence, it may be useful to add questions regarding religion and domestic violence – for example, attitudinal surveys – and the National Community Attitudes Survey was specifically mentioned. Questions can be asked to ascertain information about support such as: do people experiencing domestic violence go to church for support and if they feel safe.

Another theme in response to this question formed around demonstrating positive change in support for gender equality. This was discussed in relation to seeing changing attitudes regarding gender roles and change in church culture and leadership opportunities for women.

“ Ordination of women and remove glass ceiling.

“ Increase women in leadership.

Culture change was also understood to be evidenced when safe practices are supported, that is, when domestic violence is talked about at multiple levels and occasions, and when a faith community has the language to identify and respond to domestic violence and support those experiencing it – and when people experiencing domestic violence feel safe to disclose. Concern was raised by some participants that anecdotal evidence is showing that women are leaving their church communities due to poor responses to domestic violence and/or conservative views regarding the roles of women in faith communities. To counteract this and change culture, participants suggested addressing key theological teachings and statements such as around marriage, divorce and gender, as well as addressing shame and myths regarding responsibility for domestic violence.

“ When we're not seen as enablers.

“ Issues of DFV and family violence are talked about at every level including the pulpit.

“ Decrease theology of submission.

“ Acknowledgment that faith-based communities can be key places of healing.



Suggestions for understanding making a difference also included reporting from victim-survivors, that they feel safe to disclose and knowing that people experiencing domestic violence are linked to specialist family violence services by FBOs. There was also discussion of measures that provide information about referrals and the outcomes of collaboration.

“ Survivors’ voices encouraged and listened to as key voice in dealing with this issue.

“ People linking into family violence services because referred to by church.

“ Victim survivors are reporting that churches are a safe space to report.

“ FV sector are hearing the positive stories from women about support from the church.

Lastly, a key theme from the conversations regarded the presence of domestic violence training, policies and protocols being in place in FBOs. These material resources, it was argued, would support culture change, practical supports, faith leaders and faith communities, safety for victim-survivors, and perpetrator recovery. There was also the suggestion to support developing DFV expertise within FBOs.

“ Safe spaces are established locally and denominationally for disclosures to both happen and be effectively addressed.

“ Training and protocols in FBOs.

# Conclusion and recommendations

Participants in the roundtable discussions, research presenters and panel discussion members together described many initiatives already underway in faith-based organisations and communities to understand, recognise, prevent, and respond to domestic violence. This effort and recognition of the significance of the issue of domestic violence and the role of faith in victim-survivor and perpetrator experiences and recovery, as well as the role of faith leaders, faith communities and FBOs in supporting safety, safe practices, and non-violence in faith settings, reflects a momentum for change and action that builds on existing conversations and concerns. Roundtable conversations reflected the research to date, that is, the concerns regarding faith-based practices and attitudes that may enable domestic violence and spiritual abuse or ignorance or denial or both. At the same time, roundtable conversations clearly articulated what can and needs to change to better understand, respond to and stop domestic violence, offering many suggestions and practical considerations going forward. The opportunities identified by event participants and through roundtable discussions drew on their expertise and experiences and described the strengths of faith communities, which can be utilised to stop domestic violence in religious contexts.

The following recommendations are made based on the roundtable discussions of the five questions.

## Recommendation: Support faith leaders responding to domestic violence

Faith leaders have an important role in supporting safe disclosure of domestic violence and those individuals affected by it. Faith leaders require support through education and training to understand domestic violence, recognise and inquire about it safely, and in how to refer people to specialist services. Furthermore, faith leaders require support to understand diverse experiences, and in how to respond to both victim-survivors and perpetrators across their communities, including theological awareness of gender, domestic violence and theology that supports prevention, response, recovery, and equality. The role, responsibility and capacity of faith leaders to respond to domestic violence also needs to be supported by FBO policies and procedures, including pathways for faith leaders to access domestic violence expertise and ongoing training and education regarding best practices – as well as their own self-care and ongoing support.

Faith leaders can use their position to enable and lead positive culture change that addresses the gender drivers of domestic violence as well as helps establish safety for their faith community. This includes leading conversations and preachings that address DFV and using language that supports gender equality. This is important to ensure that faith leaders can provide pastoral and spiritual support to individual victim-survivors and perpetrators that are informed by safety, evidence and best practice.



## Recommendation: Support safe practices through collaboration

Collaboration between faith leaders, and FBOs and specialist domestic violence services has much to offer in terms of creating and supporting safe practices with families in religious context. The bringing together of knowledges such as evidence-based practice mitigating risk and building safety, with acknowledgment of intimate and personal spiritualities, has the potential to change culture and sustain safe disclosures and practices within religious and sector services.

## Recommendation: Religious contexts be part of the National Plan

On 17 October 2022, the Australian, state and territory governments released the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* (National Plan). The National Plan is the overarching national policy framework that will guide actions towards ending violence against women and children over the next 10 years. It highlights how all parts of society, including governments, businesses and workplaces, media, schools and educational institutions, the family, domestic and sexual violence sector, communities, and all individuals, must work together to achieve the shared vision of ending gender-based violence in one generation. The Plan and subsequent Action Plans provide a timely opportunity to increase engagement with FBOs and communities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, despite the growing research into domestic violence and the advancement of corresponding National Plans, policy and practices, religion and domestic violence is an area that is under-theorised, under-researched, and perhaps misunderstood. Yet, there is much potential for FBOs and communities to be part of prevention and response initiatives to tackle domestic violence because religion influences leaders', congregations' as well as men and women's ideas about gender and family values, and hence, plays a powerful role in the development of family life. The recognition of the intersections between religion, gender and domestic violence has the potential to break the cycle of violence in families.





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# Related resources, initiatives and research

Below is a list of resources and research referred to by event attendees:

- Anglican Church of Australia General Synod Family Violence Working Group (2021). *Ten Commitments for Prevention and Response to Domestic Violence in the Anglican Church of Australia*, <https://anglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Ten-Commitments-April-2021.pdf>
- Anglican Diocese of Melbourne <https://www.melbourneanglican.org.au/pvaw/>
- Davis, E., Vaughan, C., Moosad, L. & Sullivan, C. (2021). *Evaluation of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne's Preventing Violence Against Women Program*, Melbourne, VIC: Anglican Diocese of Melbourne and the University of Melbourne <https://www.melbourneanglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/PVAW-Program-Evaluation-Full-report-digital-1.pdf>
- ANROWS National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey <https://www.anrows.org.au/research-program/ncas/>
- Australian Baptist Ministries preaching toolkit <https://saferspace toolkit.com.au/>
- Catholic Diocese of Broken Bay <https://www.bbcatholic.org.au/our-faith/social-justice/domestic-violence>
- Joint Churches Domestic Violence Prevention Project (JCDVPP) Queensland <http://www.qct.org.au/index.php/layout/joint-churches-domestic-violence-prevention-project>
- Lutheran Church of Australia - Hidden Hurts Healing Hearts campaign [website and resources] <http://www.preventdfv.lca.org.au/>
- National Council of Churches in Australia <https://www.ncca.org.au/safe-church-program/domestic-and-family-violence>
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