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Understanding the role of faith-based pastoral care in responding to domestic violence

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For the final published article, please see: Clarke, J., & Wendt, S. (2026). Understanding the role of faith-based pastoral care in responding to domestic violence. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*.

<https://doi.org/10.1332/23986808Y2026D000000125>

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the increased focus on the role of religion, religious leadership and faith-based organisations in ending gender-based violence including domestic violence. In understanding the rationale for this development, we identify three key areas that need further consideration. First, what is the role of religious communities in ending gender-based violence; second, what is the role and practice of faith-based pastoral care in responding to people experiencing domestic violence; and third, what is the role of the faith-based organisation in considering frequent gender-based hierarchies? We ask these questions drawing on findings from Australian research with two Christian denominations. Findings demonstrate the need for further consideration of the potential for religious-based community and leadership engagement with and responses to victim/survivors, as well as perpetrators, of domestic violence. We also consider what will support safe and effective pastoral care practice to address gender-based violence.

Keywords

religion, Christianity, domestic violence, pastoral care, gender

Key messages:

- It is important to understand and resource faith-based pastoral care practices aligned with wider community supports and services available to victim-survivors, and, to perpetrators.
- Effective responses to DV in religious contexts requires addressing the theological beliefs, religious discourses and practices that legitimatise gender inequalities.

Introduction

Violence against women and gender-based violence is recognised as a major global public health issue (Stoeckl and Sorenson, 2024). This includes recognising the significance of the prevalence and harmful impacts of domestic violence, also referred to as intimate partner violence. The World Health Organization (2024) estimates that globally 'over a quarter of women aged 15–49 years who have been in a relationship have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner at least once in their lifetime (since age 15).' Nearly one in four or 23% of women in Australia, have experienced intimate partner violence since the age of 15 (ABS, 2023).

In recent years, Australia has not only been reporting victimisation but also perpetration, highlighting the gendered nature of interpersonal violence. For example, Our Watch (2025), Australia's leader in the primary prevention of violence against women, reports that men are more commonly the perpetrators of physical violence, sexual harassment and sexual violence. Specifically, it is reported that 'around 1 in 4 men in Australia aged 18 to 45 say they have used physical and/or sexual violence against an intimate partner' and 'men aged 18-30 who identify with rigid stereotypes of masculinity are 17 times more likely to say they have hit a partner' (The Men's Project and Flood cited in Our Watch, 2025). Regarding prevalence in faith communities, research was completed for the Anglican Church of Australia, which found that among survey participants the prevalence of intimate partner violence for those who identified as Anglican, was comparable to or higher than the prevalence in the broader community (Pepper and Powell, 2021).

It is commonly argued through research, advocacy, and practice domains that gender inequality must be addressed to prevent violence against women by men. At the same time, it is largely recognised that gender inequality is a feature often present in the institutions of religion (Nyhagen, 2017). The complex role of religion and how it influences understandings and experiences of domestic violence, particularly exploring the relationship with gendered understandings in religious teachings, is increasingly being considered. Research has highlighted that religion can be a barrier for women seeking help for domestic violence, but religious practices and beliefs can also be a significant source of strength for experiencing healing and recovery (Wendt, 2008; Ghafournia, 2017; Wendt and Zannettino, 2015; Pepper et al, 2021; Aftab et al, 2024). Despite this recognition, little research exists in the Australian context that specifically explores men's perpetration of domestic violence within religious contexts, and that is willing to explore contested and troubled positions regarding gender understandings and power relations in theological contexts (Clarke et al, 2024).

It is perhaps difficult to enter this research space as for many religious people the experience of domestic violence is intricately intertwined with their spiritual life, including gender understandings, in such a way that it is difficult to understand one separate from the other. For example, our own research with the Lutheran Church of Australia found that the capacity of gendered theological discourse and arguments for the truth of scripture to both inform and justify domestic violence and potentially be part of the solution, are inherent tensions in the religious culture (Wendt et al, 2024). We have argued, if understandings and responses to domestic violence in religious contexts are going to advance, and be part of the solution to domestic violence more broadly, an examination of the theological beliefs, religious discourses and practices that legitimatise gender inequalities is required (Clarke et al, 2024). Furthermore, how the expertise and experiences of religious leaders and congregations can be utilised to stop domestic violence – and be victim-centric – also needs exploration. This article is informed by these considerations and aims to advance understandings of the role of pastoral care in preventing and responding to domestic violence in religious contexts. The role of faith-based pastoral care involves the provision of spiritual support in response to an experience of vulnerability (Helsel, 2019). Prior research draws attention to a focus on pastoral care as a significant and diverse concept and practice embedded in religious life - and we recognise there are many models of Christian pastoral care (Pembroke, 2025). Our research and discussion is exploratory and informed by inquiry to support ending violence against women and safety. Therefore our consideration of pastoral care is

to understand its potential in opening up the prominence of specific gendered ideas endorsed through theological beliefs and practices that needs attention, if the discourses surrounding domestic violence in Christian religious contexts are going to change.

Our considerations are informed by research completed for two Christian denominations in Australia – the Lutheran Church of Australia and the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide. While the review offered in this paper is not limited to these Christian denominations it is important to note that discussions of faith and terminology used are informed by our researcher experience. We acknowledge our review has a particular emphasis on researcher insights drawn from working with these Christian denominations and in the context of settler Australia. Our research aims to explore how faith communities shape understandings and experiences of, and responses to, domestic violence, and what will support their capacity-building to further contribute to ending violence against women. In doing so we aim to contribute to the broader consideration of the changing role of religious community involvement in addressing such violence.

Religious communities and addressing domestic violence

Our Watch, as mentioned above, through its strategic and guiding role in the Australian context, first developed *Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia* in 2015 (Our Watch, 2021), which is a population-based approach to addressing VAW. This guiding framework describes how community groups and non-government organisations are critical to supporting primary prevention work:

A primary prevention approach works to change the underlying social conditions that produce and drive violence against women, and that excuse, justify or even promote it. It works across the whole population to address the attitudes, norms, practices, structures and power imbalances that drive violence against women. (Our Watch, 2021, p 8)

Hence, the role of civil society and community, is of critical importance in conversations, actions and strategies, to raise awareness about domestic violence and VAW, and contribute to its prevention.

The role of religion and faith communities are increasingly being identified as significant contributors to the community-based prevention effort that plays a crucial role in ending domestic violence. In the Australian context, this is expressed in many ways. For example, Our Watch recognises that faith settings are a significant environment for prevention work and nested in the ‘whole-of-setting-approach’ (2021, p 96) that can support and effect ending VAW. For another example, the State of Victoria’s Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV) that was established in 2015, and the final report released in 2016, identified the significant role of faith communities and leaders, and includes a chapter dedicated to considering issues specific to faith communities (State of Victoria, 2016). The RCFV’s final report included three recommendations for faith communities: the development of training for faith communities and leaders, in how to respond to family violence (FV); reviewing specialist FV service standards to ensure they are responsive to the needs of people of faith who are experiencing family violence; and third, that:

Faith leaders and communities establish processes for examining the ways in which they currently respond to family violence in their communities and whether any of their practices operate as deterrents to the prevention or reporting of, or recovery from, family violence or are used by perpetrators to excuse or condone abusive behaviour. (State of Victoria, 2016, p 165)

All RCFV recommendations were accepted by the Victorian Government which claims full implementation, and resulted in funding for initiatives, including supported training development and pilot projects.

The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2042 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022) confirms the significant role of prevention as a key component to addressing VAW and children and continues to identify the critical role of communities in facilitating the conditions necessary to end VAW, which includes supporting gender equality. The first National Action Plan (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023) that accompanies the National Plan, asserts the equal importance of 'governments, businesses and the community' (p 5) and this is inclusive of how 'faith organisations have a role to play in recognising and responding to gender-based violence and abuse in ways that do not cause further harm to victim-survivors' (p 17). Therefore, responsibility for ending violence against women is shared by the three areas of society.

Policy and government mechanisms as well as non-government organisations involved in addressing and responding to domestic and family violence, are identifying the significant role and responsibility of faith communities to ending VAW. These frameworks and initiatives co-exist with a number of faith-based community and organisational efforts previously developed or currently underway, to address domestic violence. For example – and to draw on the denominations we have worked with to date – the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide is committed to the Anglican Church of Australia's campaign called Ten Commitments, to address domestic violence (Anglican Church of Australia, 2021), and the Lutheran Church of Australia has the 'Hidden Hurts Healing Hearts' campaign (Lutheran Church of Australia, 2024). There are also ecumenical and collaborative efforts and resources that support addressing VAW and domestic violence. Some Christian communities have established groups to acknowledge the significance of resourcing advocacy, research and actions, in faith community and institutional efforts to end domestic violence and VAW (Powell and Pepper, 2021a; Wendt et al, 2023a; 2023b).

Despite the emerging yet still limited research into religious contexts, what these examples above show there are examples of faith-based resources and efforts to address domestic violence that are supported by numerous individuals, groups and communities, and developed through the respective specific faith lens. Resources may provide definitions of various types of violence, provide advice on help-seeking, offering support and responding. These activities, projects and advocacy may also name and seek to address regret for past practices such as ignoring domestic violence, upholding the ideal of marriage over victim/survivor safety, and not holding the person who used violence to account. Some resources also name the misuse of key theological ideas and scripture that have been used to justify male perpetration of violence and abuse. Campaign narratives may also uphold the significance of supporting gender equality and emphasise respectful intimate partner relations as critical to ending VAW (Anglican Church of Australia, 2021; Lutheran Church of Australia, 2024).

It is important to also acknowledge faith communities are diverse, and that they have various perspectives, resources, capacity and influence – the latter includes the capacity to inform and shape wider community attitudes and behaviours, and influence governments. There is by no means a consistent approach by FBOs and communities to their role in addressing domestic violence nor in undertaking prevention work. Therefore, in considering the religious context to domestic violence and VAW, we argue it is important to ask: what context and whose perspective and experience including lived experience, is framing the role of religion, in ending domestic violence and violence against women?

We pose these questions because religion can and does substantially influence understandings of family life, marriage, gender, and sexuality (Shorter, 2021; Hollier et al, 2022). Religion, faith and spirituality can also shape understandings of safety, risk, justice and accountability. Understandings of society's response to domestic violence and gender-based violence may require consideration of significant relationships to the divine and spiritual, and these need to be recognised as powerful relationships – and may be relations of power and authority – informing experiences of violence. As well, the wider faith-based context offers potential to support prevention, response and healing, and understandings and practices of accountability, of those who use violence. We propose that the concept of pastoral care may offer this opportunity to explore the significance of spiritual truths, to open possibilities of difference, other truths, and enable people with

faith's navigation of other discourses of everyday gender in religious contexts that can safely contribute to ending domestic violence (Wendt et al, 2024).

When considering religious organisations and communities, some have experienced a loss of trust and status, and this is a particularly pertinent point considering the ongoing impacts of child sexual abuse in religious institutions and in the Australian context, particularly those that are Christian (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017; Crittendon, 2019). As McPhillips (2018) argues in considering evidence from the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and with a focus on the Catholic Church, the abuse has also resulted in spiritual trauma and injury experienced and impacting on 'individual and collective wellbeing' (p 232). The opportunity for the further development of the role of faith leaders, communities and organisations in addressing domestic violence, cannot ignore the various types of abuse and violence that has been enabled by some religious institutions, leaders, and norms within faith communities. This includes clericalism, sexual abuse and violence committed by clergy, and the role of religion and faith in contributing to colonising Australia and religious institutional practices supporting suppression of Indigenous people and their spiritualities, and support for government policies of forced separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (HREOC, 1997; Commonwealth of Australia, 2017; Clough, 2022; McPhillips and McEwan, 2022; Possamai and Tittensor, 2022; Deverell, 2024; Prehn, 2024).

Naming these matters is not to note and allocate to history, but to draw attention to the intersection of experiences of violences and abuses – and institutional systems and structures – that continue to matter and be addressed. These matters identify the potential risks of practices of faith-based pastoral care. As Hürten et al (2025) argue in their consideration of vulnerability with respect to sexual and spiritual abuse in the Catholic Church, and drawing on the work of De Weger and Death (2017), pastoral relations are situational and intrinsically involve power relations embedded in a religious system and institution shaping understanding, recognition and experiences of – and responses to – vulnerability and victims of abuse. Further, a focus on the power in pastoral relations needs to be understood with respect to what supports holding those perpetrating abuse, responsible.

Faith-based organisations are also increasingly involved in the direct delivery of social services addressing a range of vulnerabilities (Parsell et al, 2021). This is a role that has escalated in Australia (and elsewhere), in association with the rise of neoliberal restructuring of welfare service delivery (Atalay, 2019; Possamai, 2023). This is another example of how distinctions between civil society, the state and markets, are challenged considering faith, faith-based organisations and service provision. Further, as Aftab et al (2024) demonstrate in their discussion of the DFV services provided by Muslim Women Australia, faith and Islamic values supports agency work and ensuring the provision of culturally relevant and empowering support services. In the Australian context, it is also important to note that historically, many religious women have been involved in addressing social justice matters, such as VAW, and have opportunity to be ordained in religious institutions, building public spiritual leadership (Carland, 2020; Lee, 2021; Clough, 2022; Aftab et al, 2024). Thus, faith intersects in many significant ways in understanding and addressing vulnerabilities, and indeed, in defining 'vulnerability' (Hürten et al, 2025), as well as who gives and receives and is deserving of, help and care. As Seymour et al (2023):

the framing of who does what to whom – and related assumptions concerning risk, vulnerability, and protection – have important implications for how we think about and respond to gendered violence.
(p 30)

On this point, drawing on our recent research with Christian denominations in Australia, we now consider the role of faith-based pastoral care and what it is and can offer, in addressing domestic violence.

Faith-based pastoral care

Understanding faith-based pastoral care

Our research with two Christian denominations – the Lutheran Church of Australia and the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide – highlights the importance of the provision of faith-based pastoral care in responding to victim/survivors of domestic violence. In this discussion of the role of pastoral care, what it is, how it is practiced, and critical considerations in what it can offer responding to people experiencing domestic violence, from the outset we acknowledge there are various interpretations and practices, and these are embedded in their respective faith-lens. For example, the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide uses the Anglican Church national code to define ‘pastoral ministry’ as:

the work involved or the situation which exists when a member of the clergy or church worker has responsibility as part of their role for the wellbeing of others. This includes the provision of spiritual advice and support, education, counselling, medical care, and assistance in times of need (General Synod, 2004, p 14).

Who practices pastoral care can include ordained and officiated religious leaders, lay leaders and church workers. People who provide pastoral care may do so in various settings as part of pastoral ministry, including community settings, congregations, education and health environments.

Pastoral care work in Christian contexts involves recognising and addressing vulnerability and suffering, and involves relating to God (Helsel, 2019). We draw attention to the importance of the role of pastoral care to understand what it means, how it is practiced, and what it can offer, as part of a response to domestic violence. Undoubtedly is it an important consideration given the extent to which religious leaders engage with domestic violence issues. Powell and Pepper (2021b) in a survey with Australian Anglican clergy and lay leaders, found that 68% of clergy and 19% of lay leader respondents had dealt with people in domestic violence situations. Elsewhere, results from a cross-denominational Christian study, the 2016 National Church Life Survey, found that 67% of senior local church leaders had dealt with domestic and family violence (Pepper and Powell, 2022). In their survey with Australian Anglican clergy and lay leaders, Powell and Pepper (2021b) also found that nearly all (98%) of clergy and 79% of lay leaders provided pastoral or spiritual care in responding to victim/survivors; in contrast, 39 % of clergy provided pastoral or spiritual care in responding to perpetrators, and 13% of lay leaders provided this support, to perpetrators.

Certainly, the role of religious leadership has received much attention and critique regarding understanding and responding to domestic violence. Prior research has raised serious concerns regarding religious leader attitudes towards understanding, recognising and supporting women experiencing domestic violence, and failing to prioritise and support victim/ survivor safety (Barnes and Aune, 2021). Research has drawn attention to religious leader limited training and capacity to recognise risk and respond to domestic violence and understand referral pathways, as well as patriarchal attitudes, and theological and scriptural/ passage/ sacred text justifications, that have resulted in unsafe responses and/or justified masculinities supporting male violence and abuse of intimate partners (Bent-Goodley and Fowler, 2006; Nason-Clark et al, 2017; Berra, 2018; Zust et al, 2021). That there is a role for faith-based pastoral care in responding to domestic violence is a discussion that must recognise the potential use of religion by those using violence and abuse, to harm. Further, this discussion cannot isolate individual perpetrators and neglect the faith-based community, institutional and leadership context and gender norms, informing any capacity-building efforts to involve faith communities and pastoral care practitioners, in addressing and ending domestic violence.

Two Australian Studies

In 2024, the Lutheran Church of Australia released a Final Report titled: *Religion and Domestic Violence: exploring men’s perpetration* (Wendt et al, 2023b). In 2024, the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide released a

Final Report titled: *A study into the experiences of clergy and church workers in the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide when responding to abuse of children, sexual assault of adults, and domestic and family violence* (Wendt and Clarke, 2024). We now draw on the findings of these studies, that we were invited to conduct, to consider the role of religious leaders and pastoral care in preventing and responding to domestic violence. Both studies received approval from Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Collectively, these studies interviewed/ qualitative surveyed 28 clergy, pastors and church workers, and pastoral care emerged as theme in analysis offering insight into opportunities for pastoral care in supporting safety and accountability, in responding to domestic violence. However, gender inequality also presented as a dominant theme in both studies and as argued in this paper, pastoral care offers most opportunity when supporting gender equality in responding to domestic violence.

Interviews conducted for the study for the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide included the questions 'How do you provide pastoral care to victim-survivors of child abuse, adult sexual assault, domestic and family violence?' and 'How do you provide pastoral care to perpetrators of child abuse, adult sexual assault, and domestic and family violence?' Interviews and qualitative survey responses for both studies were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In both studies interviewees and qualitative survey participants self-selected to be included.

Findings: Pastoral Care

In the findings of both studies, pastoral care was constructed as practices of spiritual support and theological teaching, and many participants explained pastoral care has healing potential for those experiencing domestic violence, and potentially enables attitudinal and behaviour change of perpetrators of such violence and abuse. Many participants argued the role of the church community is to build safe environments – physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually – for those experiencing domestic violence, offering spiritual and practical support and comfort. Simultaneously, many participants expressed concern that knowledge regarding domestic violence, and responses, will not be advanced or safety established in the future, without leaders and church communities challenging cultural ideas and norms that reinforce gender power relations and gendered hierarchical structures within religious contexts.

Spiritual support and theological teaching

Most participants explained that spiritual support can assist in responding to different forms of interpersonal violence and abuse; and this was the space that participants expressed had much potential for supporting healing, and highlights the significant role the church community can play in responding to such complex issues as domestic violence. For example:

We are not trained in counselling at high levels, but we are there as someone who is able to listen and support and be present. And I think that's the gift of church pastoral care, is that, just [be] present with people, ... not solving problems. It's not giving advice. It's not, it's not trying to do therapy...being a listening ear and being present. And being able to offer a prayer and ritual. (Craig, Anglican Diocese of Adelaide)

Participants talked about theological teachings and how they can be used to frame understandings of gender, sin, and domestic violence. Theological leadership was therefore required to identify, explain, and challenge theological references and teachings that male leadership and men who use violence draw on to deny, minimise, or justify such attitudes and behaviour. Within Christianity, there are numerous Bible passages in the New Testament that have been used overtime to do so. Pastors and Clergy explained that the history of translation, language use, and interpretations must be acknowledged and understood to challenge gender power relations. Furthermore, in the interviews Pastors and Clergy also showed how they used theological teachings to counter denial, minimisation, and justification of domestic violence, by engaging in teachings of love and respect. For example:

*There are social justice themes throughout the scriptures that looks very much at advocating for the weak and the oppressed. I look at those themes and the importance of Christian life being enriching, sustaining, nurturing, encouraging life and taking joy in another. This is embedded deeply within the Christian scriptures. So, I take a social justice view, who is taking that from you ... male power is impressing on other people, I do not care about not saying that anymore ... it needs to be said.
(Pastor Tom, Lutheran Church of Australia)*

Another participant – one of two male participants from the study for the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide – describes pastoral care in responding to and challenging the behaviour of men who have used violence:

What's important in offering pastoral care to people who've experienced violence and abuse, from a broad educational point of view, we all have the spirit of God within us, and we are all wanting loving relationships with everybody, regardless of sex, colour, gender, race and all those things – that's what the Bible and Jesus story tells me and so as for pastoral relationships we need to call out violence, we can't accept that violence ... and perpetrators need to be ... the correct interpretation. We've got to change attitudes by reinterpretation, and a new look at the scripture and saying, well, that's what we thought of then, but now we think that is not so much wrong, but old fashioned, no longer relevant, partly to be more gender inclusive (Peter, Anglican Diocese of Adelaide)

The interview findings draw attention to the role church-based organisations and leaders can play to support addressing domestic violence, such as the opportunity for pastoral care practice to support healing and recovery for those experiencing it, and for leaders to support perpetrator accountability and safety of victims through theological interpretation.

Gender-based inequalities in faith communities

Even though gender inequality has been argued across the world as a leading cause of domestic violence, participants explained in interviews that within religious contexts gender equality can be contested. Many congregations and families uphold beliefs that men and women's roles are naturally and divinely hierarchical. Ideas of complementarianism and the created order argue that God made men and women as essentially different and these differences contribute to different familial roles, rights and duties, which are complementary and as such are crucial for cohesion and stability of society. Such ideas endorse and enable the conditions of gender inequality, and potentially domestic violence. Some participants explained that domestic violence might not be recognised or understood, and therefore difficult to address because many parishes and faith communities potentially view it as an expression of the gender order reinforced by complementarianism and gender hierarchy based on scriptural interpretation. For example:

*I have always avoided any reference to male headship ... I have also never held the sanctity of marriage, or the call to forgive as reasons to leave a woman trapped with a violent partner, by guiltting them or requiring them to forgive and love when endangered by lack of love and respect
(Pastor Greg, Lutheran Church of Australia)*

Another participant articulated how supporting victims of domestic violence includes attention to the broader church culture, in understanding how to enable safety:

I think pastoral care is, in the first instance, is listening and believing, having access to places that you know are safe where they can get professional help and asking them if that would be helpful for them. And having a safe environment, you know, so if you're in a church, being really mindful about the environment is safe ... Some of that environment's not safe because it's highly patriarchal, the language used is often sexist and so that culture's not terribly safe actually. (Margaret, Anglican Diocese of Adelaide)

Across the interviews with Lutheran and Anglican participants, many expressed concerns that knowledge regarding domestic violence, and responses, will not advance within religious settings until cultural beliefs about gender power relations, and gendered hierarchical structures within religious contexts are also challenged and change. Many participants making this connection between gender inequality and domestic violence argued theological leadership and pastoral care is required to assist victims, perpetrators, and more broadly congregations, to understand and have faith in other teachings that enable equality, respect, and love.

Discussion

Through a reflection on the role of religion and considering its role in addressing domestic violence, specifically considering the role of Christian religious contexts, this article has drawn attention to the increased focus on religion and gender based violence. Religion influences understandings of gender, gender relations and hence influence understandings of domestic violence. We argue religion then has an important role in preventing and responding to gender inequality and the violence and abuse that it can cause.

The insight into how pastoral care can contribute to ending domestic violence, offered from the two Australian studies with Lutheran and Anglican denominations, shows how religious leaders and church workers are, and can, use their positions to enable and lead positive cultural and theological change that addresses the gender drivers of domestic violence, and establish safety for their congregations. The attachment and relationship with God, or Jesus Christ, offers a powerful motivator and guide for Christian people that secular organisations cannot necessarily address. Similarly, theological leadership in challenging gender power relations, hierarchy, and interpretations of religious texts also has much potential to address structural and cultural drivers of violence against women and children more broadly within society.

Recognising pastoral care in people's lives, brings attention to the role of religious leaders, church workers and congregations in shaping and potentially changing attitudes and behaviours through questioning teachings of inequality and entitlement of men over women. It is imperative that both violence and power within a religious context, are noticed, so that teachings of equality and peace can strengthen and support safety in interpersonal relations. Further, it is important to ensure that faith-based pastoral care recognises and prioritises victim/survivor safety and needs, and that faith-based organisations are responsive to victim/survivor lived experiences and insight.

The findings from the two studies cited in this paper again shows that domestic violence is a complex social problem that requires a whole of society, whole of community response, and religious organisations and their leadership are an important part of this response. Yet we also want to draw attention to how practices of offering pastoral care and support, benefit from awareness of and relationships with specialist domestic violence services and the sector's contribution to primary prevention efforts. Research findings draw attention to both the unique positioning and valuing of faith-based pastoral care in supporting addressing gender-based violence and supporting victim/survivors, as well as the need to support pastoral care practices that align with established sector practices supporting safety and the cessation of violence. Faith-based pastoral care in supporting ending gender-based violence is not without risks, therefore, limits to practice and capacity need further consideration considering the impacts of patriarchal faith-based organising structures and gender-based power relations. Specific gendered ideas endorsed through theological beliefs and practices will need to be part of the conversation in supporting faith leaders and communities as part of civil society, to address gender-based violence.

We also recognise there is the opportunity for the domestic violence sector to continue to develop relationships with faith communities and this work needs dedicated resourcing. We also wish to avoid unhelpful dualisms and recognise that people with faith work in social services, including working in the specialist sector as well as faith-based social services (Aftab et al, 2024). In recognising the significant role

of pastoral care, we also understand its unique positioning to support help-seeking for those experiencing violence and abuse, that religious and spiritual contexts are spaces where vulnerabilities may be expressed, and help-seeking occurs. Considering these matters, ongoing conversations – and future research - about the role and practices of pastoral care require further consideration with respect to who is responsible for what, in supporting community-based efforts to prevent and safely address gender-based violences.

Further, as the findings from the two studies described indicate, it is important to understand what are the faith-based organisational structures and policies that support pastoral care practices, and how can they be informed by an evolving sector and national policies and practices, that seek to address violence against women *and* children. This is to reconfigure the idea of religion as simply a private matter, and a challenge to integrating the role of faith-based organisations considering the loss of trust and legacies of violence and abuse. This also requires reconfiguring understanding of how religion and associated institutions contribute to broader discussion about gender (Nyhagen, 2017). We also note that considerations of who does pastoral care practice, roles and responsibilities, requires thought with respect to the gendered relations and power dynamics within faith communities: who is expected to, can and does what in supporting violence prevention and responding to experiences of violence, and considering any existing gender-based hierarchies. Further, we argue an increasing focus on the role of religious leaders, communities and organisations, in contributing to preventing, responding and supporting the recovery of those experiencing domestic violence, requires unpacking difficult truth claims about gender relations and inequalities, and supporting theological interpretations.

Limitations

We wish to note some limitations. We are drawing on findings from research conducted with and for two different Christian denominations and further, the study for the Lutheran Church of Australia was national in scope whereas the study for the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide was with one Australian Anglican diocese. Further the interviewee responses regarding addressing interpersonal violence and abuse in the study for the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide did not always distinguish what type of violence their response applied to considering.

Participants in the two studies self-nominated to be included. At the time of conducting the study for the Lutheran Church of Australia the ordination of women was not permitted (this has subsequently changed) however it was being debated. At the time of the study for the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide the ordination of women was permitted and female and male clergy participated in the study. While most Anglican dioceses in Australia permit the ordination of women it is noted not all do. As Shorter (2021) describes, the Anglican Diocese of Sydney supports a theological argument for complementarianism that establishes a gendered discourse that limits women's participation in leadership – notwithstanding this is contested. Thus, it is important to situate the research we conducted and acknowledge diversity and debates within these Christian communities regarding the role of women, gender relations and gender equality. These considerations inform the context to the research, limitations and also the opportunities the studies presented to participants. Both studies resulted in research reports presented to the Lutheran Church of Australia and the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide and included recommendations to support ongoing church organisation capacity to improve its role and practices in addressing domestic violence.

Conclusion

In focusing on the role of religious communities in contributing to ending domestic violence, we have considered matters that are specific to Christian religious communities, and provide further consideration regarding the role of pastoral care. From our studies it can be argued, pastoral care has an important part to play in supporting safe disclosures, responses, and healings from domestic violence. Further research and in partnership with religious organisations and communities is needed to understand the nuanced potential of

pastoral care and theology, and how to enable capacity-building of leaders and congregations in their pastoral care practice that is safe and equitable for everyone, including leaders, congregations, victim/survivors, and in responding to people who use violence. Moreover, further consideration of the role of pastoral care can support understanding integrated social supports relevant to people experiencing domestic violence who identify as religious.

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Funding details

This work was supported by:

- The Australian Research Council grant CE230100004.
- The Australian Research Council grant LP190100269.
- The Anglican Diocese of Adelaide.

Citation

Clarke, J., & Wendt, S. (2026). Understanding the role of faith-based pastoral care in responding to domestic violence. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1332/23986808Y2026D000000125>

Acknowledgements:

The authors acknowledge and thank the following:

- the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide's Survivor Advocacy Group for requesting and supporting the research
- the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide for supporting and funding the research
- Ms Sharon Lockwood, Survivor Advocate, Anglican Diocese of Adelaide
- Lutheran Church of Australia Bishops and Domestic Taskforce members for their support and commitment to the research
- Emeritus Professor Wendy Mayer, Chief Investigator for the research undertaken for the Lutheran Church of Australia, and for their contribution to the design and completion of the research project
- research participants for both research projects, who shared their time, experiences and invaluable insights.

The authors also acknowledge the previous research undertaken by Dr Zoë Morrison (2005) for the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide. Dr Morrison's research informed the design of the research undertaken for the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide.

This research was supported (partially) by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (Project number CE230100004).

Contributor Statement:

JC and SW wrote the first and subsequent drafts of the manuscript. SW conceptualised and designed the study for the Lutheran Church of Australia with contribution from JC. SW and JC conceptualised and designed the study for the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide. JC and SW conducted data analysis and interpretation.

Research ethics statement:

Ethical approval for the 'Religion and domestic violence: exploring men's perpetration' project was granted by Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID HEG2232-1).

Ethical approval for the 'A study into the experiences of clergy and church workers in the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide when responding to the abuse of children, sexual assault of adults, and domestic and family violence' project was granted by the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID 6129).

Data availability statement: The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis.