



# Taking a Critical Look at Ourselves

## *The Mennonite Community*

By Ruth Vogt

As an employee of the Winnipeg Core Area Initiative, I am occasionally called on to participate in interview sessions for training programs for people needing special assistance. During one such interview, a Native woman was asked to list some of the causes of the problems experienced by Native people.

"The church," she replied, "has caused us more problems than any other institution." Pushed to give reasons for her answer, she stated that the Old Testament teaching to "spare the rod and spoil the child," a teaching stressed both in theory and in practice by the church in their "mission" work in Native communities, has resulted in an acceptance of family violence that is causing incredible suffering in Native communities today. She also mentioned the part played by the church in conjunction with the government in the policy of removing children from their families and placing them in the schools run by various denominations: schools in which many youngsters experienced abuse of various kinds.

The recent release of a study by Isaac Block has focused attention on this question of domestic violence and abuse in the Mennonite Community. The study, sponsored by the Mennonite Central Committee of Canada, revealed the extent to which Mennonite church members in Winnipeg are experiencing domestic abuse. Based on a random sample of 187 adults from Winnipeg Mennonite churches, there were 65 incidents of physical abuse in a 12-month period. The same group recalled 1,295 incidents of abuse against them by their parents or guardians in their childhood. Abuse was defined as throwing things, pushing, slapping, hitting with an object, beating up, kicking or using a knife or gun. In addition to physical abuse, 25 per cent of females reported sexual abuse.

The Mennonite Central Committee must be congratulated for supporting a study which is potentially embarrassing for its own community. It is believed to be the first time that a Canadian denomination has conducted a study of itself of this kind. The irony in one of the "historic peace churches" finding violence within its doors is, or should be, unsettling. Yet this is an issue that must be dealt with firmly. Can we expect governments to settle conflicts without the use of force, yet continue to condone the use of force on an individual level in our own community?

In his study, Block makes a number of valuable suggestions regarding ways in which the church could be more helpful in dealing with the problem. At present, few victims of domestic abuse turn to the church for help, possibly because "most victims are females victimized by males and all salaried pastors at the time of the interviews were males!" Block recommends "avoiding theological formulas and 'pat' answers from the Bible;" he also calls on Mennonites to examine the biblical concept of submission which has been corrupted into a theology of dominance. Since pastors also have tended not to counsel abused wives to leave husbands because of a high view of the marriage agreement, Block questions whether personal safety should rank higher than marriage if the marriage is abusive. He recommends that Mennonite churches should devote more time and personnel to offer services to victims of abuse, and recommends the creation of a "Christian" shelter in Winnipeg. In his view, programs which offer care to abusers should also be created.

It is hoped that these recommendations will be taken seriously by all the groups which are part of the Mennonite community. Victimization of a group or any individual in any community must not be tolerated. Pastors should receive more training in recognizing and dealing with instances of family violence. The fact that women are reluctant to confide in male pastors is one more reason to recommend that churches be open to having women on their pastoral teams. No doubt the presence of a female pastor might play a role in increasing the respect that church members have for women as individuals. At a time when domestic violence is seen as a growing problem in society at large, the Mennonite community should strive to be seen as providing solutions — rather than being part of the problem itself.

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