Translating Spiritual Commitment
The Response of Evangelical Women to

by Lori Beaman-Hall and Nancy Nason-Clark

Les auteures examinent comment les femmes qui étudient les Évangiles se dévouent pour rendre service aux autres et, du même coup, viennent en aide aux femmes victimes de violence patriarcale.

Women have used their links to each other through religious participation for their own gain.

Despite the often patriarchal nature of organized religion, a higher percentage of women than men participate in church life (Nason-Clark 1994; Bibby). Not only are women more likely to be religiously affiliated, but they are also more intensely involved in religious life than are men; they organize church fund-raisers, they attend church more frequently, they sing in church choirs, they lead church youth groups, and they network with other church women through women's groups. Such intensity of involvement is especially characteristic of evangelical women, whose lives are often centred around church activity (Beaman-Hall).

For evangelical women, an important component of their spiritual commitment is the demonstration of their "difference" from those who do not ascribe to an evangelical worldview (Ammerman). Difference is manifested by putting the needs of others first, which translates into an emphasis on service to others, a hallmark of evangelical women's lives (Nason-Clark and Beaman-Hall 1996). Is this commitment to service demonstrated when evangelical women come into contact with women who have been abused by their husbands?

One of the difficulties faced when examining the problem of wife abuse in conservative Christian churches is the pervasive nature of the rhetoric of happy family living, which translates into the idea that Christian families who are following biblical standards are not supposed to have problems like wife abuse. In addition, churches have been slow both to recognize and to respond to wife abuse (Nason-Clark 1995).

In this article we explore the ways in which the spiritual commitment of evangelical women translates into a commitment to service which results in practical support to women who have been the victims of male violence. We seek to challenge the notion that conservative Protestant women are submissive servants, or doormats who accept violence against women as a part of women's duty to submit to their husbands. In concert with their feminist sisters in the secular world, evangelical women identify male abuse of power and desire to control as the most likely explanation for violence against women (Beaman-Hall 1996). In their view, male violence against women has no place in family life.

Our discussion in this article is based on findings from the program of research currently being conducted by the Religion and Violence Research Team at the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research, coordinated by Nancy Nason-Clark. The Religion and Violence Research Team is a multi-disciplinary team made up of both community and academic researchers. The overall goal of the Team is to conduct action-oriented research designed to improve the response of organized religion to violence against women. For this article, we have drawn on one study in the Team's program of research which explores how church women understand and respond to the problem of violence against women. That study involved 30 focus groups in Atlantic Canada and included over 200 Baptist and Wesleyan women. We have also drawn from dissertation research which included semi-structured interviews with 94 evangelical women in Atlantic Canada conducted by Lori Beaman-Hall.

Conservative Christian women and social action

Despite the patriarchal nature of organized religion, women have used their links to each other through religious participation for their own gain; the suffrage movement in Canada during the first wave of feminism benefited from the support of evangelical women (Gorham; Kealey; Banks). Admittedly, there is still debate over the costs of basing the argument for suffrage on the notion of women as the moral guardians of society, a role which was largely an extension of their roles as mothers and wives (Kealey). However, as Scott points out, it is too simplistic to portray the history of feminisms as a "story of oscillations between demands for equality and affirmations of difference" (145). The point is, evangelical women in Canada have a long history of social action in response to women's inequality in society.

The second wave of feminism was prompted in part by women's dissatisfaction with male domination of the civil rights and socialist movements of the '60s (Rhode 55). The central concern with early second wave feminists was their desire to control their own bodies, particularly in relation to reproduction (see Garskof 1971). The idea that women were best suited for work in the home was also a focus of the second wave.

It is easy to see why second wave feminism alienated many evangelical women. What had previously been celebrated—women's prowess in the

domestic sphere—was dismissed as oppressive. Androgyny was posited as the solution of the day. This focus on sameness was at odds with the evangelical worldview's positing of God-ordained, distinct roles for women. In addition, the abortion debate was also divisive. The ability to destroy that which framed the focal point of many evangelical women's existence, their children, was offensive to many conservative Protestant women and was viewed as being morally wrong. As a result, evangelical women did not have the same level of involvement in the second wave of the feminist struggle as they had in the first wave.

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Given that the primary response to violence against women has come from the feminist community, it is important to understand the relationship between evangelical women and feminism. Where do evangelical women stand now in relation to feminism? A surprising 45 per cent of the women interviewed were willing to call themselves feminists, although half of those women qualified their commitment to feminism to a moderate type of feminism. Moderation meant pay equity, and equal advancement opportunities; it did not mean militancy and the denigration of men. Equality among evangelical women was often tempered in definition to mean equal but different. Some of the women interviewed associated feminism with selfishness and a "me first" attitude which brings it into direct conflict with the "others first" attitude espoused by evangelical women. Some women felt that they could not be feminists simply because they were full-time homemakers. In summary, although evangelical women view feminism as largely beneficial to women, they are wary of the extremism often associated with the feminist movement.

Despite their acceptance of feminism, of greater ideological impact on evangelical women is their religious worldview. For the women who participated in this research, it's okay to be a feminist as long as being a Christian comes first. In the lives of evangelical women, being a Christian is manifested first and foremost in a commitment to service. To them, the secular world is characterized by selfishness, thus they demonstrate their "difference" by putting others first.

The response of evangelical women to wife abuse

How does evangelical women's commitment to service, which is integrally linked to their spiritual lives, translate into action in relation to violence against women? First, it is important to understand that the response of church women is mediated by their contact with abused women which in turn is linked to how evangelical women understand the nature of abuse. Among the 94 evangelical women interviewed, more than 90 per cent had known at least one woman who was living in an abusive relationship, and nearly as many (87 per cent) had provided support to at least one victim of abuse. Victims included friends (both Christian and non-Christian), acquaintances, mothers, sisters, cousins, and daughters.

This extensive contact impacted on the ways in which evangelical women understand and define woman abuse. In their definitions of wife abuse, evangelical women emphasize non-physical aspects of abuse. Though they clearly consider physical abuse to be serious, equally as serious are those forms of abuse which are not as visible, as is illustrated by this participant's statement:

> *I think any sort of behaviour toward a woman that makes her feel less of herself. Like she is no good. Anything that would humiliate her, anything that would strip her of her pride—make her feel less than she knows that she is. It's not very long before people begin to believe that they are less than what they know they are.*

Descriptions of emotional and mental abuse were broad, ranging from psychological abuse to belittling, putting down, neglect, and treating a wife as a servant and not a partner. In our other research, we have discovered that clergy are often unwilling to name the problem of violence against women as such—they revert to generic terminology like "family violence" (Nason-Clark and Beaman-Hall 1993). Unlike clergy, evangelical women do not hesitate to name violence against women as wife abuse, male violence against women.

Equally as sophisticated and surprisingly feminist were evangelical women's understanding of the causes of abuse. Though sacred explanations such as "sin" and "misinterpretation of scripture" were cited as causes of abuse, the most frequently offered explanations were those which are viewed as emanating from the feminist community: power and control, and patriarchy.

45 per cent were willing to call themselves feminists, although half qualified their commitment.

How then, did this interesting combination of commitment to service to

others, extensive contact with victims, and feminist understanding impact on church women's response to violence? Although conservative Protestants especially have been accused of responding to victims of violence with advice to "go home and pray about it" (see Fortune; Bussert), this was not the response being offered by the evangelical women who participated in this research. The following comment by a 37-year-old mother of two is illustrative:

> *How can you say to a quote unquote non-Christian, "oh, come in sweetie, let me pray with you?" They're going to go "hah! pwetwey in your face." You know, that's not a sensible thing to do at first, although God does answer prayer and God is a God of miracles. But you have to tell this woman that you care in tangible ways with um ... dropping her kids off or give her a pair of boots or a hug, if you have nothing to give her. Come in and have a cup of coffee, but provide some place for her to go—whether it's your place or not.*

This woman's approach was typical in that while she highlighted the importance of God and her belief in his (her language, not ours) power, she also recognizes the realities of dealing with those who do not share her worldview. Though the women interviewed were certainly willing to offer spiritual support to victims of violence (usually in the form of prayer for or with the victim), the majority of responses cited were practical, rather than spiritual. The church women we talked to had provided material support such as food, clothing, and money; they had offered child care; intervened with secular agencies; provided a "listening ear" and emotional support; and they had offered information or advice.

Although their social action on this issue may be less dramatic and is less politically motivated than activism situated in the feminist community, the response of evangelical women to violence against women is rooted in feminist understandings of violence against women (Beaman-Hall 1996). Further, despite ideological differences, evangelical women support woman-centred secular organizations which offer services to victims of abuse.

Of the 94 women interviewed, 44 per cent had made some form of donation to their local transition house as an individual. Forty percent reported that they had made a donation through a church women's group. Donations included money, goods, and activities such as painting or cleaning at the transition house. This material support of transition houses has been confirmed by transition house workers themselves in other research conducted by the Religion and Violence Research Team (Nason-Clark and Beaman-Hall 1993).

Despite the fact that they recognize the potential ideological differences between themselves and transition house workers, evangelical women were overwhelmingly willing to consider the shelter as an important community resource to which they would take (and had taken) victims of violence with whom they had contact. This participant's comment illustrates the dilemma faced by church women:

> *I don't always believe in everything that a shelter represents. You know, some of their, um ... views, I guess, might be opposed to mine. Like they don't, they certainly would not come from a Christian perspective, the shelters that I have been associated with, and ah, so their particular philosophy might be different from mine, but as far as the ... their view of women, and the need for women ... the need to empower women and the need to support women who are in very difficult situations, and who often ... the shelter is their only option. And the church is often not very helpful in meeting the needs of women. When they go to the church, sometimes they have been told you know, go back to your husband and work it out.*

In contrast to their support for transition houses, the women we interviewed were far less supportive of the criminal justice system. For them, the woman-centred support of the transition house was the secular option of choice when offering assistance to abused women.

Conclusion

Evangelical women manifest their spiritual commitment through service to others which, in relation to abused women, translates into practical and spiritual support for those in need. But, their service extends not only to abused women themselves, but also to support for transition houses, which are seen as a valuable community resource, despite the likelihood of ideological differences.

What has become clear from this research is that although there exits a gap between the rhetoric of happy family living within the conservative Protestant worldview and the response to wife abuse by the church, evangelical women are not the cause of nor do they perpetuate that gap. On the contrary, church women are aware of the seriousness of the problem, are sensitive to the needs of abused women both within and outside of their faith communities, and are willing to offer a variety of forms of support to women who have been the victims and survivors of male violence.

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