



UNIVERSITY OF  
**LEICESTER**



# Church Responses to Domestic Abuse: A Cumbrian Case Study

Dr Kristin Aune, Centre for Trust, Peace & Social Relations, Coventry University

Dr Rebecca Barnes, Dept of Criminology, University of Leicester

# Outline

- Setting the context
- Our study – its aims and methods
- Key findings
- Recommendations
- Summary



# Setting the context

- An estimated 26% of women and 15% of men have experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16 (ONS 2018)
- The Church is a significant social institution:
  - The Church is the UK's biggest institution, present in 50,000 communities (Brierley 2014)
  - Christianity remains the biggest faith group with 59.3% of the population identifying with it. 5.4 million attend church at least monthly (ONS 2012; Brierley 2014)
- *'there is ample evidence that religious faith and domestic violence are co-mingled'* (Nason-Clark 2009 p.389)
- Restored & CTiC have been pivotal in encouraging and empowering churches to address domestic abuse
- But there is a lack of robust, up-to-date academic research on the relationship between Christianity and domestic abuse in the UK

# Our study

- Collaboration between two universities, Restored, Churches Together in Cumbria (CTiC)
- Why study Cumbria?
- Survey across denominations (ecumenical study)
- Online and paper survey
- Two phases of recruitment:
  - random sample of 230 churches selected, of which 129 agreed to distribute our survey
  - opening the net more widely to all churches and Christian groups/organisations in Cumbria
- Ethical approval received from Coventry University
- Methodological challenges



**Matthew 25 35**  
**Trust**



# Our aims were to identify:

- The rates of domestic abuse amongst male/female churchgoers;
- The nature, dynamics and impacts of domestic abuse for churchgoers;
- The levels of awareness of, and attitudes held by, church members and church leaders, relating to the occurrence of domestic abuse in their congregations;
- How churches currently respond to domestic abuse; and
- Churchgoers' experiences of seeking support and guidance in relation to domestic abuse.

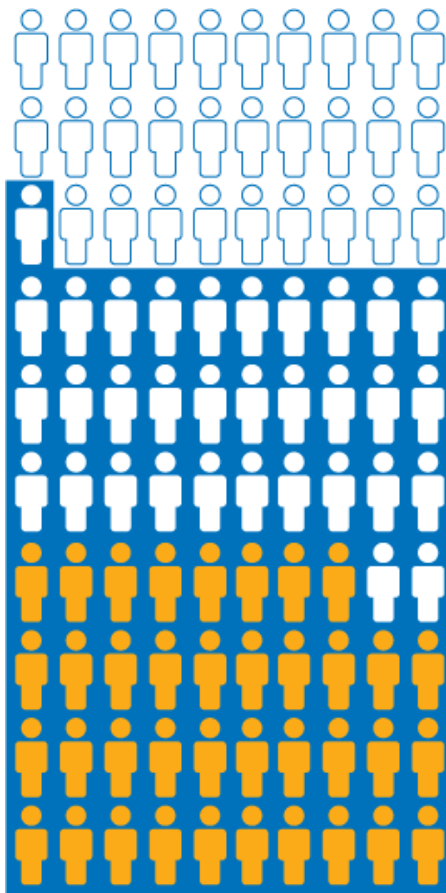




# Survey sample

- 438 usable responses – largest ever UK survey on this topic
- Three quarters were female
- The majority (97.9%) were white
- 68.8% were aged 60+
- Almost half attended Anglican churches, followed by Methodist (22.2%), Roman Catholic (12.9%) and many other denominations
- The vast majority were regular churchgoers and half held a leadership role

# Perceptions of domestic abuse



**71.0%**  
were aware of  
domestic abuse in  
their **COMMUNITY**

**BUT ONLY**  
**37.6%**  
thought it was a  
problem in their  
**CHURCH**



**only around**

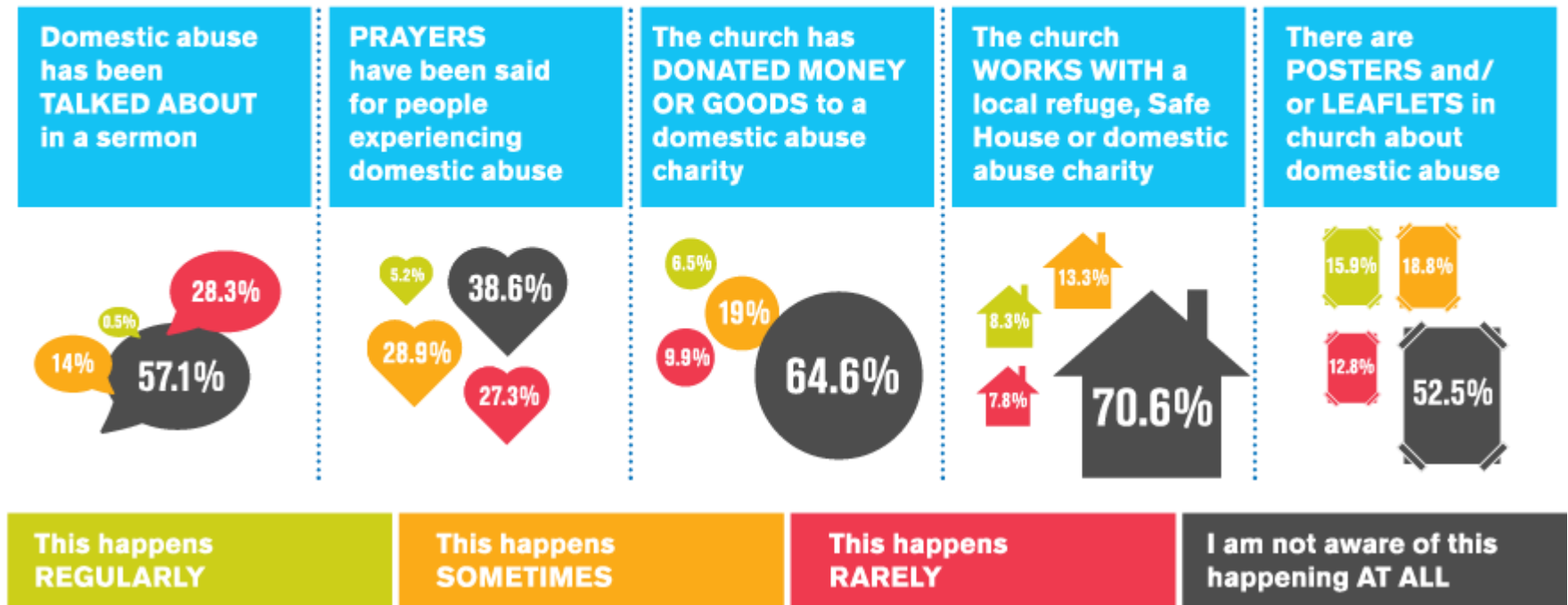
**2** in **7**

**churchgoers**  
consider their church  
to be adequately  
equipped to deal  
with a disclosure  
of domestic abuse

# How churches are responding to domestic abuse

**Which of the following are you aware of in your church?**

(% of people selecting each option)





# Experiences of domestic abuse

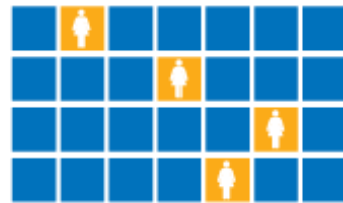
- One in four ( $n=109$ ) had experienced at least one abusive behaviour in their current relationship;
  - this includes 12 women who have experienced between 10-20 abusive behaviours and six women who are currently in relationships where they fear for their lives
- 42.2% of the whole sample had experienced at least one of the abusive behaviours we asked about in a current or previous relationship
  - Caution needed around interpreting this figure
  - Johnson (2006) – different types of domestic violence: intimate terrorism vs. situational couple violence
- Gender and age differences

# Rates of prevalence for each category of abuse are **higher for women than men**

**WOMEN WERE MORE THAN FOUR TIMES** as likely as men to report having been **SEXUALLY ABUSED** once or more



No men reported being **PHYSICALLY ABUSED** on a weekly basis, whereas **3.2% OF WOMEN** did



**WOMEN WERE ALMOST FOUR TIMES** as likely as men to report experiencing **FINANCIAL ABUSE** several times a year



**WOMEN WERE MORE THAN TWICE** as likely as men to report experiencing **SPIRITUAL ABUSE** several times a year



- On average, women reported experiencing more behaviours, higher frequency abuse, and a higher number of impacts
- Of those who reported experiencing at least one abusive behaviour, 57.4% of women and 16.7% of men self-identified as having experienced domestic abuse

# Seeking help and helping others



Over  
**half**  
of the sample

**54%**

had sought  
support  
**outside**  
of the church

# Seeking help and helping others



# How can churches improve?

- **Survey participants' comments reflected the need for:**
  - Greater awareness and discussion of domestic abuse in the church
  - Opportunities for training
  - Confidential, non-judgemental listening and support
  - Signposting people to relevant services
- Working with other agencies
- Embedding domestic abuse as a safeguarding issue
- Prayer support
- Access to counselling

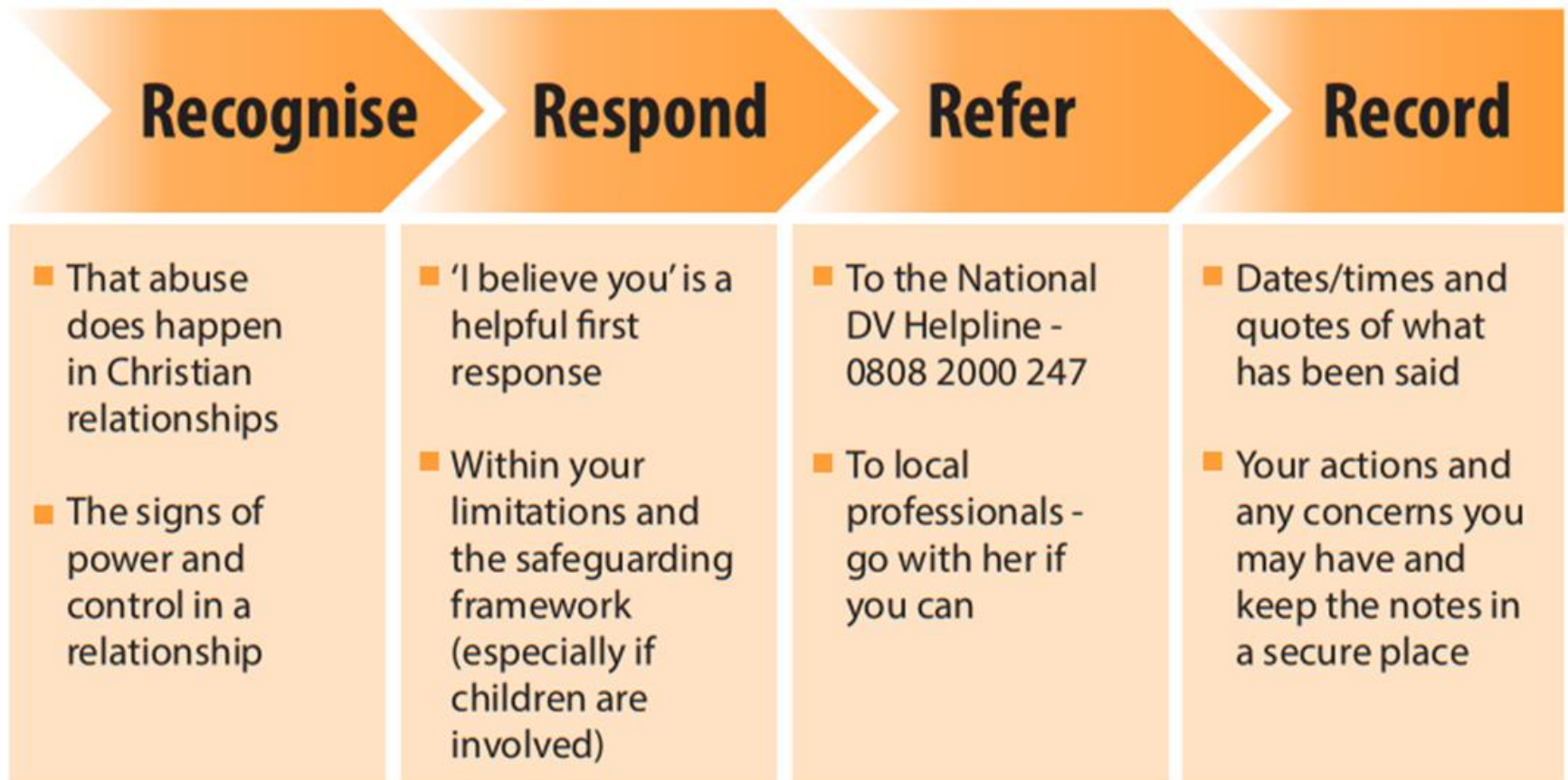


Much more friendship and keeping in touch, with less interference or lip smacking or any sort of condemnation or criticism. A victim I knew, who has stuck to church going through very distressing physical and mental abuse, but had very seldom been visited by her Minister (or elder) (once a year for money) - when she finally left her husband, she was told by her minister "we don't want your sort here"! (female, 80+, Methodist)

Use appropriate passages in the Gospel during the homilies to refer to domestic abuse; offering mercy and pardon to abusers would make it easier for victims as they would not be seen as disloyal or troublemakers but in a situation in need of prayer (female, 70-79, Roman Catholic)

# Recommendations

- 15 recommendations outlined at the end of the report, structured around Restored's '4 Rs' of responding to domestic abuse



# Summary

- Churches remain key institutions in many communities, reaching more people than many other community organisations
- There is considerable potential for churches to either help or hinder, so training such as that offered in Cumbria by CTiC & LetGo is vital to ensure responses are appropriate and safe
- This research shows that domestic abuse happens in churches too – with disclosures of ongoing, systematic abuse meaning that urgent action is required
- A national-level study, including qualitative data, is needed
- Download the report and Restored's Church Pack from [www.restoredrelationships.org](http://www.restoredrelationships.org)



# Survivor voices

Churches need to encourage reality of life, that they are there as 'hospitals for the broken' and not 'palaces for the perfect'. A place where the broken and insecure can feel safe and find healing, filled with real people and not perfect/plastic people (female survivor)

The fact that the church is an open door can be a blessing and a problem, a blessing as it welcomes the stranger, and a problem as it allows them somewhere to hide (female survivor)