

Rage and beyond: Father's day initiative

by [Jennifer L. Rike](#) in the [June 3, 1998](#) issue

A naïve celebration of parents and parenthood sometimes takes place in church on Father's Day. But this year, I am encouraged by the launching of a new initiative in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): a 12-member task force "Healing Domestic Violence: Nurturing a Responsive Church Community." It has been appointed to explore the causes of domestic violence and examine the church's complicity in it. The panel will propose policies to educate church members about domestic violence, offer strategies for preventing it and formulate guidelines for responding to it.

The ways in which churches promote violence and block healing are frequently subtle and complex. I was reminded of this on Father's Day four years ago. The service was led by two well-intentioned laymen who spent the entire service singing the praises of fathers and fatherhood. In spite of the congregation's well-established practice of using inclusive language for God, they kept lapsing into male metaphors for the divine. Then, during the time for sharing concerns, a physician broke down in tears as she spoke of working in an emergency room until 5 o'clock that morning, trying to help a family that social services had failed to protect. The mother and all three young daughters had been raped by the father.

Without missing a beat, the next speaker railed at journalists and the public in general for judging O. J. Simpson guilty without trial. The clash between the ideal and the real hung heavily in the air.

I sat nervously, feeling torn about what to do. I remembered how I had once hated the way victims kept bringing the attention back to themselves and spoiling the nicest occasions. But the defense of a convicted wife beater was the final straw. I approached the mike, and surrendered the anonymity of a survivor that I had maintained for years.

It is right and good that we take this occasion to thank and celebrate all of the fathers who have loved, protected and sacrificed for their children throughout their most tender years. But perhaps we should also remember all those fathers who did not love their children, but hated, used and abused them. They too need our prayers, that the Holy Spirit might enter their hearts and lead them to recognize the devastation they have wrought, and to seek forgiveness and the power to change their ways.

I returned trembling to the pew. Afterward I learned I was not alone in feeling excluded by a service that ignored my experiences of betrayal and abandonment. Several men and women whom I hardly knew thanked me.

Each year the celebration of Mother's and Father's Days confronts the church with a dilemma. How can we celebrate those parents who exercised their authority with true love and respect and avoid provoking yet more agony in those whose parents did nothing of the sort? For them, Father's and Mother's Days add insult to injury, with constant reminders of their losses and constant provocations to experience yet again the terrible pain of those losses.

Victims of child abuse constitute a significant portion of the population. Probably the most devastating form of abuse is sexual abuse, and about 4.5 percent of all women are sexually abused by their fathers or stepfathers before the age of 16. Other physical, psychological and emotional forms of abuse are far more common. Moreover, most neglect and abuse is never recognized, much less reported, and even when it is, greatly overburdened case workers are unable to investigate thoroughly every suspected case. In fact, much abuse does not qualify as criminal behavior, but remains emotional and psychological in scope.

The rejection and manipulation of vulnerable spirits by parents who use children to meet their own sometimes perverse needs has profoundly destructive consequences. The nationwide expectation that one be grateful for such parents on these days becomes a personal trial for many people.

This is not a pleasant thing to face. Even though our culture has become increasingly aware of violence, media coverage points to cases in the lower classes and among ethnic minorities. It is easy for churchgoing folk, particularly in the middle to upper classes, to dismiss child abuse as a problem restricted to families sunk into alcohol and drug abuse, living on the other side of the tracks. I suspect

that the recent fascination with the brutal death of JonBenet Ramsey reflects the shock many people feel that a family as prosperous and prominent as the Ramseys might be harboring such a horrible secret. Unfortunately, child neglect and abuse permeate all socioeconomic, ethnic and religious groups. The middle and upper classes are just better at hiding it.

Our churches are willing to acknowledge a host of ills in our fallen world--hunger, homelessness, prejudice, and crimes and addictions of various sorts. But most continue to resist recognizing that child abuse--which is often the cause of those other problems--exists in our midst. Why?

The reasons are many. Those who truly are good parents find child abuse too abhorrent to understand or even imagine. Moreover, abusive parents are nearly always lost in the self-deception so typical of perpetrators, and they rationalize the brutal truth away with excuses: he asked for it; it's my right and duty as a parent to teach the kid some discipline; I'm not really hurting her. Such hypocrisy is especially common among those who shore up their self-esteem by fancying themselves "good" Christians: they will deny the truth in every way possible because they cannot face the contradiction between the loving persons they claim to be and the cruel ways they actually treat others.

Guilt is, after all, an acutely painful thing to work through. Refusing to address the problem helps former victims hide from the shame and rage they once felt, the shame and rage that they still feel when they remember what happened to them when they were most vulnerable and innocent. Better to repress it, forget it and move on; better to deny the truth than relive its pain, for there is no way to change the past.

But repression and denial do not heal. The only way beyond the past of abuse is through it. And the healing that enables us to get beyond the past is made possible when we're heard by empathic others--people willing to listen to our rage and our grief while we allow the memories of abuse to resurface, people who make us feel that it is both right and safe to feel that pain again so that we can let it go. This is the painful but ultimately liberating course that healing requires. And if the Christian faith is not about helping one another heal, then it does not express the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, a healer and exorcist of demons, as its Lord and Savior.

The work of the new task force will, of course, extend beyond child abuse to all forms of domestic violence. The Presbyterian Church is to be commended for daring to reclaim its prophetic role in an effort to end the churches' traditional avoidance of this pervasive problem. Its elaboration of how some of the most cherished beliefs and practices of the Reformed tradition implicitly encourage violence will undoubtedly provoke heated controversy and resistance.

But perhaps the days of avoidance and denial are over. By taking this initiative, the church is recognizing that the need to keep reforming lies not simply in the changing times but in a growing consciousness of why we need to change--we have sinned, we continue to sin and we must repent of our old ways and change. Guiding our ongoing reformation will be the conviction that belief, law and practice should be guided by the love of Christ, and the love of Christ "builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1) broken bodies and spirits into whole ones.

This Father's Day I shall take the opportunity not only to celebrate creative and loving parenting when it occurs, but to mourn when it does not. Such mourning requires first and foremost that we listen with understanding and compassion to those who struggle to be healed from their experience of the perversion of parenting. As they grieve, we must reassure them that the love of God that once empowered them to survive will now, in and through our communities, empower them to be healed.