The Battered Wife, by Nancy Nason-Clark

reviewed by James Leehan in the August 26, 1998 issue

By Nancy Nason-Clark, The Battered Wife: How Christians Confront Family Violence. *(Westminster John Knox, 155 pp.)*

Church leaders could be society's most effective agents against family violence. They see families regularly, know all of their members and, often, their histories, and have access to their homes in ways unavailable to other human service professionals. But their ability to recognize and deal with violence in families in their congregations is often discounted.

Nancy Nason-Clark explores and in many cases explodes myths about how conservative church leaders and members respond to cases of domestic violence. The findings of her amazingly comprehensive study--she uses questionnaires, interviews and focus groups made up of clergy, volunteers and victims--provide nuances to commonly held assumptions about how evangelical clergy view and respond to people reporting family violence.

Nason-Clark "found no evidence . . . that clergy suggested that women return to an unchanged abusive environment, or that they should simply endure the suffering, or that they should work harder at being better wives." Though clergy are committed to preserving marriages, believe that relationships can be transformed and saved, and see family violence as a spiritual problem, they are sensitive to reports of violence and recommend a wide variety of resolutions. They do not, in all cases, oppose divorce.

Many therapists who specialize in treating family violence are troubled by what they see as conservative clergy's "bifurcated vision of violence," limited perspective on its dynamics, and lack of skill and experience in treating conflicted families. Nason-Clark found that although clergy have accurate perceptions of the frequency of abuse in the larger society, they greatly underestimate its frequency in church families. They understand the sociological and psychological dynamics of abuse but think that these dynamics do not apply to Christian families. Too often clergy see abuse simply as a spiritual problem with spiritual solutions. They do not recognize or

understand the economic and social pressures binding women victims, and they are unwilling to identify hierarchical family relations as partly responsible for violence in families of faith.

As a result, pastors may not give the Christian families who seek their assistance the help they need. Most notably, conservative pastors are "less likely than secular counselors to ask about violence" and are reluctant to refer conflicted Christian families to "secular" professionals for help.

Nason-Clark also studied the women-to-women informal helping networks that exist in many evangelical congregations. She found these groups more aware than clergy of the extent of family violence in society (their estimates were higher than the official statistics). But they had a similarly "bifurcated vision of both the frequency and explanation for violence in sacred as opposed to secular families" (their estimates regarding church families were almost identical to those of the clergy). Religious women reported substantial experience supporting abused women and their children. They gave spiritual support as well as practical assistance. These women volunteers were much more aware of the difficulties of the healing journey and were even "anxious to collaborate where possible with resources in their local area."

Nason-Clark's work is more a guide for those designing clergy education programs than for parish clergy themselves. She does not provide practical how-to guidelines for clergy, but she does identify the psychological, sociological and theological attitudes which affect the way clergy respond to victims and perpetrators, and the skill they need if they are to assist them. These are topics which can and need to be addressed in seminary and in continuing education classes. This study suggests what needs to be taught and how to teach it in a way that respects conservative theological positions.

Presently, at least 70 percent of clergy who participate in workshops on family violence are women, indicating that family violence seems to be viewed as a women's rather than a family issue. Nason-Clark's work addresses this misperception. She places dealing with family violence firmly in the center of the church's traditional and commendable commitment to family values. She provides information, insight and language that can help bridge the gap between clergy and activists on the issue of family violence. The two groups can be complementary, finding much common ground in their commitment to safety, to the condemnation of violence, to the healing and empowerment of victims and to compassionate care for

all family members.