

Article

The Wounded Body of Christ, the Church and Perennial Escalation of Gender-Based Violence and Its Implications for Pastoral Care

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Abstract: It is a known fact that gender-based violence is an infringement on human rights. Gender-based violence takes place all over the world in almost every place. It is experienced in homes, workplaces, communities, and in the Church as well. Today, church members, as well as pastors are wounded, fragmented, and hurting as they suffer serious abuses in silence. Christian children have fallen victim to sexual abuse that is perpetrated by their parents. Parents too, have become victims of violence; sometimes maimed by children who have become violent enough to kill their Christian parents in their homes. Furthermore, many Christian couples have continued to experience intra gender violence in their families that is often attributed to marital infidelity. Beyond that, there is also a common secretive kind of abuse in the form of marital sexual violence which is a serious form of violence against women. This is a hidden type of abuse that has been perpetrated behind closed doors for too long by members of the body of Christ. Due to its prevalence sometimes the victims themselves, often pretend that the problem is not present by keeping a deafening silence. This article, therefore, makes an in-depth investigation into the causes of the pervasive forms of gender-based violence that occur in some Zambian Christian homes, with particular emphasis on the ways in which this multifaceted phenomenon is very much hidden. This article expounds on how Christian couples have continued to suffer silently as their voices are suppressed due to fear and shame. In the conclusion of the article, it is suggested that, unless the church, in its pastoral care role, awakens from its slumber and begins to address issues of gender-based violence in the church with sincerity, honesty, and openness by admitting that indeed, the body of Christ is yearning to be healed, gender-based violence shall remain a perennial occurrence.

Keywords: human rights; body of Christ; fragmented; abuse; wounded; healing



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1. Introduction

What often comes to mind when the word church is mentioned, is an image of a group of people who gather together regularly at particular times and specific locations to worship God. The church as the “Body of Christ” is presented by Schoeman Lourens (2011) as a faith community with members interlinked to each other. This is a description that brings together the meaning of a holistic and complete union of people who live in oneness and unity. It is a community of believers that acknowledge and submits to the headship of Christ.

The expected values of the body of Christ therefore reflect that this community is one in which everyone is needed and welcomed. It is an inclusive, friendly place where the definition of hospitality is genuinely offered. The church is a place where neither wealth nor status are the basis for acceptance, but a place for fellowship, where every burden of the heart is brought to God and where sins and transgressions are presented to God and perfectly accepted by him. The church is a place of forgiveness, it is a spiritual hospital where complete healing is sought and offered. It is also a sanctuary of love, acceptance, and family gathering, a lifesaving and life changing place, where people are made whole through an enriching fellowship with God.

However, it is evident that, today, the body of Christ has suffered a major setback to attaining the fulfilment of love and care, because it is within the body of Christ that many people have found a lack of satisfaction. Today, many members of the church, who comprise the body of Christ, no longer exhibit the aspects of true and genuine love within their own homes and hence render the church less of a haven and sanctuary of peace. In fact, some of the members in the church come from fragmented households that are affected by various family problems, as noted by Geneece Goertzen Morrison (2022). Many are hurting, frustrated, maimed and physically wounded, whilst some are bruised spiritually, due to various factors that are related to gender-based violence. The problems facing the church today cause it to lose the primary reason for its existence and its purpose for life.

Therefore, the church is defeated when members of the body feel traumatized by the effects of the incest and child abuse that happens between father and daughter, brother and sister, or uncle and niece; when this abuse happens within the confinements of peoples own homes; and when such abusive acts affect another member of the household. How does the body of Christ become complete when a mother continues to grapple with the trauma of seeing her child wrestle with the pain of having been abused by her father? How does it become complete when, in this case, the child herself has to endure the pain of being subjected to abuse by a trusted member of the family with no power to speak out? These questions challenge our moral conscience as members of the body of Christ. Furthermore, Herman and Hirschman (2000, p. 132) point to incest as a pervasive act that destroys the familial wellbeing of a family. All these negative practices, according to Patrick Bateson (2004, p. 24), are negative acts that are restricted to human social behavior where culturally transmitted proscriptions limit sexual contact and marriage with close kin. Moreover, James Twitchwell (1987, p. 1) asserts that all human beings are raised in families, although families can take different structural forms such as extended families, the stem family, the joint family, or nuclear family; in all of these cohesions, demanded by biology, these relationships hold together a matrix of rights, expectations, obligations and roles (Twitchwell 1987, p. 1).

Judith Lewis Herman and Hirschman (2000, p. 4) note that, when people talk about marital rape, they speak of forced sex by a husband, something which is treated as sexual violence within marriage. This is a negative occurrence, and when it happens in most Christian homes, one needs to understand how this kind of violence is committed. Though, according to Herman and Hirschman (2000, p. 4) it still has not taken hold as a public issue. Moreso, Yllo suggests that, a woman who is abused in the private sphere has her rights violated, and that, most often, the consequence of marital rape is the contraction of HIV / AIDS and many other related diseases (2000, pp. 3–4). Yllo notes further that, to a larger extent, it has become clear that a large number of married women, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, have been infected by their husbands as they lack the ability to deny sex or even to ask for sex with a condom (2000, pp. 3–4). I concur with Yllo's genuine observation, because, as a minister who has served the church for over 30 years in both large and small congregations in Zambia—where the membership of some congregations is well over two thousand at each congregation—I can strongly attest that, within the body of Christ, some church members who have died had contracted sexual diseases as a result of marital rape. I can attest to this as some members have privately shared their experiences with me.

This paper, therefore, presents the common occurrence of marital rape and incest among members of the body of Christ. To justify this assertion, the article presents some of the causes of gendered sexual violence and the consequences that arise as a result of such problems. Issues of gender-based violence are very broad and complex, often times difficult to analyze, and cannot be exhausted in this article. Therefore, in order to remain focused, this article presents some of the gendered violence acts in homes, such as marital rape and incest, by presenting selected cases which I encountered in the process of offering pastoral care to the members of the church. In concluding the article, there is a focus on the role of the church and how its pastoral care can be enhanced.

2. Methodology

Pastoral care is a very distinctive discipline and one that requires various intervention methods of practice and approaches in order for it to be meaningful and appreciated. Thus, in mitigating the impact of pain experienced by the victims of sexual violence, there has been a combination of approaches and therapies that were put in place. The first approach was an engagement known as cognitive behavioral therapy, as recommended by Rosemary Thompson (2003, pp. 139–40), which is a kind of intervention mechanism that helps in the identification of problems. In the process, a combination of other traditional psychoanalytic approaches, known by Gary Collins (1980, p. 183) as concurrent and conjoint methods, were introduced. Whenever the victim and member of the church approached me with a complaint of marital rape, my first step as a minister was to conduct a separate and private discussion with that person as an individual. This would be followed by another private discussion with her husband. Afterwards, couples were jointly invited to meet with me in order to hear their views and were then invited to follow counselling. These were very appropriate methods for the determination of a clearer assessment of the couple's stories, the impact of their pain, and their actual perspective on the problem. Though three cases of marital help and two incest cases have specifically been referred to in this article, several other couples were helped through the application of this method, as it encouraged openness and trust. These proved to be very effective methods that helped to identify the thoughts that produced negative and painful feelings. These types of therapies, as encouraged by Collins (1980, p. 193), helped to deal with pain and acted as a positive path for anger management, such that the therapy sessions were very brief, and couples were satisfied with the intervention approaches.

3. The Ambiguity of the Definition of Marital Rape

Generally, society does not subscribe to the idea that a man can rape his wife, and the question often asked is: can a married man rape his wife? The failure to tackle and give concrete answers to this question provides the basis for the problem of marital rape. According to Elizabeth Pardy (2004, pp. 122–24) the word rape is derived from the Latin word "Raptus" which was used to define the act where one man damaged the property of another. The property in this case was a man's wife or daughter. As in traditional societies a wife was considered a property of their husbands. Thus, by law, when she consented to a marriage, it meant that she was owned by her husband who had the legal right to beat her if he so wished (Pardy 2004, p. 123).

Thus, in acts related to rape and male egotism, as Falola (2003, pp. 251–53) argues, what must not be forgotten is the fact that African societies are patriarchal in nature. In this context, an ideology exists in support of gender roles and gender inequality. Patriarchy is an affirmation of male domination, a way to satisfy societies along gender lines such that men receive more prestige and power than women. Equally, Kwabean Akurang-Parry (2004, pp. 10–11) notes that most African countries do not criminalize marital rape, nor do they define rape as any act other than forced vaginal sex. Lisa Cardyn (2004, p. 13), sharing similar views, notes that rape is a natural product of patriarchal social relations in which males are schooled in the art of dominance while females are taught to submit. On the other hand, Pardy (2004, pp. 123–24) further argues in reference to the views shared by Diana Russel, who in 1982 revealed that one out of every seven women who has ever been married has been raped by her husband, at least once, and some have been raped several times.

Furthermore, Brittney Nicoles (2006, pp. 1–4) expands her views further by suggesting that marital rape is an exaggerated act of masculinity which includes unwanted pregnancies, where a woman is forced into conceiving and is pushed, without her consent, into a reproductive decision that might be contrary to her wishes, or is forced to have sex without protection against diseases. Thus, when a man rapes a woman in her private bedroom, often times a man feels it is his conjugal right to do so. Merril Smith (2004, p. xi) asserts that the physical reality of rape has not changed over time, that it is the penetration of a vagina

by a penis without the consent of the woman. What have changed over time and place are definitions of rape, and the ideas, perceptions and laws concerning rape. [Smith \(2004, p. ix\)](#) further observes that, in the definition of rape, modern law accepts and recognizes the fact that sexual assault does not have any boundaries; that a man can also be raped just as wives are raped by their husbands, and that the victims of rape often know their attackers. Therefore, it is evident that rape appears in many guises ([Smith 2004, p. ix](#)).

These views are further affirmed by [Mukuka \(2019, p. 194\)](#) who articulates that the abuse of spouses is often experienced by both genders and that men too are victims of abuse in an intimate relationship. Similarly, [Lundberg-Love and Marmion \(2006, p. 145\)](#) argue that men too, experience some form of violence and that they do so more frequently than women. In fact, in broadening the scope of the definition of sexual abuse within the spheres of domestic violence, [Morrison \(2022\)](#) suggests that abuse extends beyond black eyes and broken bones. This includes intimidation, manipulation, humiliation, isolation, threats, insults, force and even the use of scripture against another person. Violence includes emotional, verbal, financial and spiritual abuse ([Lundberg-Love and Marmion 2006](#)).

Therefore, in the context of the various definitions of rape, it can also be asserted that this is a negative practice that is detrimental to human health. Rape is adjudged as a deviant behavior with reprehensible consequences, such that in some societies it is meted out with the death penalty. Furthermore, the reason that marital rape cannot be clearly defined is because of the fluidity of its meaning, and that it is culturally perceived and constructed. Though marital rape may seem to have the same, or similar, characteristics as rape outside marriage, it is something that society has failed to define distinctively because it is a controversial concept. Furthermore, and as others have observed, marital rape may be considered to be simply and specifically an act of forced nonconsensual sex involving vaginal, oral or anal penetration. In this perspective, it can ultimately be affirmed that sexual abuse is a global issue that affects many couples, and that women are more often the common victims of abuse than men.

4. Sexual Abuse and the Extent of the Problem in the Church

Having a context such as marriage within which negative marital issues are not clearly defined raises serious and pertinent questions as to whether the church is aware of cases of marital rape within its member's matrimonial homes. If the church contends that Christian marriages must be pure, in line with Christian values and principles, the question may arise as to whether there is purity in Christian marriages today. It can be argued in response to this question that the stability of modern marriages cannot be affirmed, because many Christian marriages today experience aberrant sexual practices that are markedly different from the acceptable norms. This is undoubtedly the reason that sexual abuse cannot be properly detected or clearly defined. This is because it is perpetrated behind closed doors, and often times in the privacy of the home. In fact, it is a form of human perversion that is experienced in the home.

Apparently, if the extent of sexual abuse in many Christian marriages is to be ascertained, it may be revealed that women are more prone to abuse than men, as they constitute a larger proportion of abused people in many homes. Moreover, it has been observed that women are an "endangered species" that have suffered greatly at the hands of their spouses. At the same time, from the perspective of the huge number of church members who have died from HIV/AIDS, including pastors and their spouses, it is not a hidden fact that sexual abuse in Christian homes is a reality. This is in fact a true assertion, as I am presenting these views based on my broad experience as both a church minister and as one who is privy to privileged information as a marriage counsellor.

As alluded to earlier, women who have died, including those who today live with HIV/AIDS, are often victims of marital rape. This is particularly true of those who have contracted the disease as a result of the failure of their husbands to protect themselves after sleeping with multiple partners outside their matrimonial home. In such instances, many have been infected within the confinement of their homes through marital rape.

Thus, infidelity is one of the negative factors that have created problems in many Christian homes. These views have been equally affirmed by Yllo (Herman and Hirschman 2000, pp. 3–4) following their research. Therefore, marital rape is a known hidden subject that many victims do not want to discuss openly, unless someone has won their trust. It is rather unfortunate that the church has failed to recognize the fact that marital rape exists among its members. As a church, it is probable that we would want to ‘bury our heads in the sand’ and continue pretending that such problems do not exist among the members.

According to Merril Smith (2004, p. xi) rape has always been a part of human culture, and even the Bible contains stories of rape. Throughout the centuries rape has had an impact on individual women but has also affected the evolution and development of cultures all over the world (Smith 2004, p. xi). Torres (2016, pp. 10–11) notes that marital rape is a type of subject that had, until the recent surge in aspirational legal restructuring and the global intervention efforts by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank in their recognition of marital rape as a global pandemic, attracted little scholarly research. Today, efforts are being made to prioritizing a standardized global accounting of marital rape as a key category of gender-based violence, such that there are legal frameworks and pathways in public health initiatives to aid women (Torres 2016, pp. 10–11).

In fact, Morrison (2022) argued further that sexual abuse is as rampant within religious families as it does in non-Christian homes. Almost every congregation today has members who are experiencing sexual abuse, either directly themselves or through proximity to the neighbors around whom they live. Morrison further asserts that, in spite of the abuse, none of these survivors have reported that staying and praying cured the abusive marriage (Morrison 2022). Furthermore, Chirongoma and Chitando (2013) argue that the church, as an advocate of social justice, human rights, democratic political rights and economic justice, rarely address the issues of domestic violence.

5. Some Narrated Cases of Marital Rape and Incest in the Church

Indeed, as many of its members pass through various marital conflicts, the church is a wounded body of Christ. For instance, one day, after the dispensation of Holy Communion, a woman who refused to draw to the Lord’s table followed me to my office and said, “Reverend, I have refused to draw to the Holy Communion table today because my spirit is crushed”, and upon making an enquiry why she did not find it joyful to come to the Lord’s table, the woman spoke privately and whispered that “I feel offended by my husband’s promiscuous behavior. He is an elder of the church, one who has not been remorseful for having multiple extra marital affairs with other women. He has always been spending nights outside our matrimonial home. When I refuse to consent to his demands for sex, he often forces himself on me even when he knows his status. Here in the church, he is pretentious as if nothing has ever happened. I feel pain and offended.” Additionally, Mwiti and Dueck (2006, pp. 191–92) also present the various cruel experiences of women in the Meru culture and assert that “women in such oppressive situations become so bitter at the cruelty and lack of consideration with which they are treated that they refuse to receive Holy Communion from their husbands in church.” (Mwiti and Dueck 2006, pp. 191–92).

Yet, another woman, a pastor, shared her experience with me of sexual abuse she had suffered at the hands of her husband, who is also a pastor. Her husband was unfaithful and often spent quality time with other women who are church members. Apparently, when he was confronted, he would often abuse her. Even when he was aware of his unfaithfulness, he would forcefully demand sex from his wife who had no power to refuse because all she wanted was to be a faithful wife and good pastor to the congregation. Each time she complained about it, the man used scripture to assert that the Bible allowed him to have sex anytime he needed it. If she complained of being tired, he would beat her, and would do this so often that it had become a routine. In reality therefore, these are not isolated cases, but are actual stories of the suffering of members of the church who are women in marriages. Intrinsicly, the church is left in a dilemma as, each day that passes, couples are committing suicide and killing each other as a result of intra marital disputes.

Today, it has been discovered that, having such occurrences in a home results in most women living with anger, women who resort to killing as a result of the promiscuous behavior of their spouses. A good number of Christian couples have resorted to killing their spouses, or if not, committing suicide, as evidenced by the high number of recorded cases. Darlene Rude (1999), in affirming these stories, expressed dismay at the disparity shown in the way domestic violence is currently addressed. Presenting the cases of domestic violence, she noted that there were several cases of killings involving women and girls and their intimate partners and male family members due to cases related to suspected adultery. Out of these, it appeared that the leading 'motive' for the killing was adultery, as husbands or male relatives feel challenged (Rude 1999).

However, notes Rude (1999) there was a failure by women to report these cases for complex reasons. Others preferred to remain silent because they were judged to have 'provoked' their perpetrators whose violent reaction were too often seen as inevitable, understandable and therefore somewhat pardonable. These biased comments, noted Rude (1999), somewhat legitimized men's violent behavior and sanctioned violence against women in a home. Rude saw this kind of reporting in society and the media as creating a secondary level of silence about domestic violence and homicide by blaming the victims and concealing the brutality of the attacks where such cases were described as simply domestic disputes (Rude 1999).

Thus, these were just some of the many cases of infidelity and marital rape experienced by married women in the church. In such contexts, women who are dictated by culture may have limited powers to protest nor question the man. In fact, it can be argued that the major factor in marital rape is the lack of understanding that women have with regard to the meaning of consent when it comes to sex within a marriage, as Judith Singleton (2016, p. 88) has observed, African women generally do not distinguish between "rape" and "forced sex" this is because it all draws down to the paying of Lobola (bride price), which influences these distinctions for them. Additionally, Singleton (2016, p. 88) and Stephen Schulhofer (1992), in driving their point home, argue that the law on rape should concentrate on the aspect of consent, with the goal of achieving sexual autonomy of women and thereby guaranteeing privacy, personhood and freedom. Mary Block (2004, pp. 51–52), in her understanding of the rape law, argues that the act of rape occurs in the absence of the woman's consent, and, where it was against her will, this absence of consent is still vital to the crime. This is because a man feels it is his conjugal right to demand sex even when he is fully aware of his status.

Yllo (2016, pp. 1–6) articulates that a primary foundation for patriarchal cultures is men's control over women's bodies, sexuality and reproductive capacity. In most societies women are not supposed to deny sex to her husband because he is a man and head of the household and because both are married. This concept, according to Yllo (2016, pp. 1–6), is known as "irrevocable consent", and it is at the root of the problem of marital rape, giving a husband the license to rape (Yllo 2016, pp. 1–6). Apparently, families that arrange marriage guarantee the wife's permanent consent, which is why efforts to understand and intervene in marital rape are so difficult (Yllo 2016, pp. 1–6). For lack of the ability to challenge and question a man, women most often succumb to pressure and give in to forced, unprotected sex. For instance, in the African culture, particularly for the Bemba people of northern Zambia, women live by the dictates of traditional practices, so that questioning or denying a man sex would be considered inappropriate and taboo because a man has the power to have sex with or without protection.¹

This is the teaching received by young women from their grandmothers in the process of submission to a man who is recognized as the head of a home. The aspect of confidentiality taught by grandmothers is the reason why marital rape is not reported. This kind of teaching often inhibits the full disclosure of internal negative marital issues due to cultural orientation (Mukuka 2019, pp. 194–96). Therefore, marital rape is not a problem that can be alleviated by family and friends. In fact, noting the poor record of freedom and independence of African women, Elhad Oumarou Chaibou (1994, pp. 63–64) argues that

African women have been dominated by males, whether in education or politics, and are taught to be obedient and dependent on men.

As a church minister, I have encountered several stories of sexual abuse narrated by many members, both men and women, who have confessed to abuse by their spouses, but preferred to remain quiet in their marriage for the sake of children, to avoid shame and for fear of being ridiculed by their society and fellow church members. Mrs. Mutofwe (not her real name), a member of the church who shared her ordeal before her death, narrated that her husband often raped her despite her refusal to have sex with him, a refusal arising because he never cared to protect himself even after sleeping with multiple partners. Eventually she was infected with gonorrhea, and later HIV/AIDS, and, because of shame, this woman could not share her predicament with any member of the family due to the cultural restrictions that dictate that a married woman should never diverge her private marital issues to outsiders. Mrs. Mutofwe could not even speak to her mother for fear of being ridiculed and labelled as an uncultured woman. For the lack of openness and courage to share her problems, the woman died with a huge burden in her heart.

The feeling of shame, as Fast (2016, pp. 10–15) puts it, is the “master emotion” and its existence is rarely acknowledged, with many people unaware of it even when they are experiencing it. The feeling of shame is something natural in human beings that leaves serious marks on an individual. Fast (2016, pp. 10–15) further notes that shame is “hard wired” in human beings. It is a secret agent of emotions which puts pressure when revealed by an inability to rest and a confusion of thoughts. The failure by women to express themselves and speak out against marital rape within their homes is a matter of shame which is very powerful, powerful enough to leave memories which may haunt the person for years to come and, in this case, reshape the person for better or worse. Fast suggests that the gravity of shame faced by an individual may be transformed into rage (Fast 2016, pp. 10–15).

The story of Mrs. Chuntu (not their real name) is yet another case of marital rape. Mrs. Chuntu was a member of the women’s guild who could find sanctuary at her grandmother’s home in order to avoid her husband from raping her. One day she privately shared her story with me, as her minister, that she found it inevitable that would have to run away from her marital home on the pretext that she was visiting her grandmother where she could often stay for three to four months. It was necessary for her because of her husband’s drunkenness and infidelity. Each time her husband returned home, he would oftentimes demand sex even when she was not willing. She resisted her husband’s demands for sex because she was protecting her life. Thus, the only option was to vacate and flee to her grandmother’s home. However, Mrs. Chuntu’s escapades were short lived because African cultural values dictate that a runaway married woman was not welcomed in her parent’s home. In this case, she had no legal right to live with her grandmother because she was a married woman and someone’s wife and was therefore nevertheless forced to go back to her husband’s home. The family was visited for counselling. However, it was later discovered that her husband was upset, accusing her of mistrust and complaining that it was embarrassing to diverge the secrets of their marriage. Thus, Mrs. Chuntu lived as a refugee and the victim of both sexual abuse and violence.

In fact, as Romito (2008, p. 8), puts it, women are sometimes the culprits of gender violence when they fail to protect their female children. Once abuse has been reported, a young woman who complains about abuse or gender violence is described as just being hysterical or paranoid. The complexity of hiding incidences of abuse often aggravates the situations of abuse. This is because mothers, indirectly advocate the life of silence by distancing themselves from the suffering of their children. As Romito (2008, p. 8) observes, distancing ourselves from the suffering of others forms the basis of the capacity to inflict pain and therefore torture and violation (Romito 2008, p. 8).

For instance, Daniel Jordan Smith (2016, p. 42) also gives a real scenario of sexual abuse, one that involves Margaret, a Nigerian married woman who, for fear of contracting HIV, would run to her grandmother. However, each time she was told to be a submissive

wife who should not deny her husband his right of sex since she was married to him. She carried her complaints to the elders of the church in which she congregates with the view of seeking advice. She did this because each time her husband came to her while drunk he would demand sex and if she refused he would beat her and forcefully have sex with her. [Smith \(2016, p. 42\)](#) notes further that Margaret could not leave her matrimonial home for fear of being ridiculed by society and for the sake of her children. She simply wanted peace in her home and thus allowed the situation to continue because she could have been labelled as uncultured woman. Ultimately, as noted by [Ward and Lundberg-Love \(2006, p. 58\)](#), incidences of marital rape are rarely reported by women due to a variety of reasons. Similarly, Mwitwa [Emeldah \(2017\)](#) has also asserted that most women have been silent victims of infidelity by their spouses, such that many of them have lived with tolerance, anger and under the controlling attitude of the men in their homes. Thus, because of this, the church is urged to be forearmed through marriage counsellors to take this as a challenge and wage serious campaigns against domestic violence ([Emeldah 2017](#)).

6. Incest in the Church

It can also be ascertained that cases of incest occur in the families of the body of Christ. There are reports of emotional abuse by parents, as well as extreme cases of sexually abused children and the burden of their secret alone is considered to be disgraceful to reveal to anyone. Incest is considered a crime for which an adult is responsible. According to [Herman and Hirschman \(2000, pp. 4–17\)](#) a man who sexually abuses his daughter is more than just an offender. Thus, child sexual abuse frequently occurs in a relationship where a female child is powerless to the sexual encounter. It may be brutal, or tender, painful or pleasurable, but it is always inevitably destructive to the child ([Herman and Hirschman 2000, pp. 4–17](#)).

For instance, one morning, a male member of the church shared his ordeal with me that his daughter was repeatedly defiled by his younger brother who was also a member of the church whom he had been keeping at his home. He did not know what was happening, until his daughter reported the abuse to her mother. She could not report earlier because she had been warned and threatened that if she told anyone he could kill her. Upon receiving the bad news, the father decided to seek advice on how he could handle the situation. He feared to report his younger brother to the authorities in case he was incarcerated. The man found it easier to seek help from me, his minister, whom he thought could deal with this case with counseling and with confidentiality. This is a typical example of incest in which an elder brother lived with a younger brother he trusted but who was secretly abusing his daughter.

Another member of the church, a mother of five and a member of the women's guild, was devastated by the discovery that her husband was actually sexually abusing his daughter, who was eventually infected with Syphilis. One day, she came to my office and narrated her story about her child who reported the misdeeds of her father to her. This woman could not contain the anguish and the pain within her as she was compelled to seek both spiritual and legal advice before she could engage the lawyers for a divorce. In fact, [Akurang-Parry \(2004, pp. 9–10\)](#) has observed that some of the reasons for incest were myths that stated that by sleeping with a virgin a person can be cured of HIV/AIDS. This strange belief is present in the southern region, for instance, and has been blamed for the scourge of child sexual abuse which sometimes culminates in incest ([Herman and Hirschman 2000, pp. 9–19](#)). Thus, these are just few of the many cases of marital rape and incest in the church. It is actually notable that these types of social and spiritual problems have negatively impacted the faith of many members within the Christian fraternity.

7. The Church and Pastoral Care to the Injured Members of the Body of Christ

In his observation, and within the context of pain, Jurgen [Moltmann \(1993\)](#) describes suffering as “the open wound of life in the world.” These sentiments are actually true, in relation to pain and suffering. The very unfortunate incidences of sexual violence that

exist in the homes of church members today explain the extent of the painful wounds that many have suffered. The question that arises is: How does the church, as the body of Christ become relevant and responsive to the suffering members? Following the negative occurrences in the church today, one may concur with the assertion by [Morrison \(2022\)](#), who observes that the contemporary church has been termed a hunting ground for domestic abusers. It is admitted that the church is the best place to find a gullible, timid complacent wife. Abusers know all they have to do is to fake their faith, and all they want to do is enter into the church and find a wife. Young women are also taught to value strong male leadership and to find men who are committed to God. When these girls are married before long they realize it was a ruse only to be told it is too late and that marriage is forever. There are cases where abusers have infiltrated the church and pretended to have a fervent faith ([Morrison 2022](#)).

[Morrison \(2022\)](#) further suggests that, by telling young women to be gentle, meek and passive, we are removing their God-given internal protection and that by teaching young men to physically take charge and suppress their emotions we are ignoring the New Testament's teaching about servant leadership. This is because, according to [Morrison \(2022\)](#), the character pattern that the church establishes early are carried with us for life. This is important because toxic patterns lead to lifetime entitlement for boys and subservience for girls, which both become entrenched in patriarchal marriages.

From this perspective therefore, it can now be argued that this should be a very serious wake up call to a church that has been tasked with the huge responsibility of offering a better and healthy spiritual life to the people. It must be understood that pastoral care within the current context must help us to admit the fact that the negative occurrences in Christian homes today pose a huge challenge to our conscience and moral judgment. Therefore, the church should seriously seek the face of God by making a confession and asking for forgiveness. As Herbert [Moyo \(2015, p. 4\)](#) puts it, the call of God to the church is to give support to the challenged and to kindle coping mechanisms in those who feel pulled down and torn apart. In fact, the contemporary church should no longer continue to live in denial even when it is evident that the members of the church live with pain and distorted lives. Kenneth [Boyd \(1980, p. 81\)](#) has noted that pain, sickness and suffering can be ignored or avoided but only for a time.

Similarly, in their understanding of the significance of pastoral care, [Demarest and Mathews \(2010, p. 178\)](#) observe, in their dictionary, that the church should begin to reformulate its pastoral care roles so that they are based on its universal character. This entails setting out a regular engagement in dialogue with Christian families, with the view of helping them to live faithfully and healthily in marriages and to lead Christian lives. This should also mean that, if the church members continue to persistently sin within the body of Christ, they are establishing a destructive moral pattern that causes the human conscience to become weak and defiled. If the church is corrupted, this results in the progressive loss of proper moral choices between good and evil, right and wrong and ultimately, if it compromises its moral compass, the Christian faith becomes a shipwreck ([Demarest and Mathews 2010, p. 87](#)).

Furthermore, in the process of offering pastoral care to its members, the church should begin to redefine the core values and purpose for its existence in order that it should remain relevant in today's changing world. As emphasized by [Demarest and Mathews \(2010, pp. 73, 74\)](#), the church should not allow itself to be defined by the negative challenges that appear to cast a negative shadow on its name, but to emulate God's character as the basis for its existence. Thus, for the church to remain in its rightful position, there must be a need to reformulate the pastoral care dimensions that are well developed to suit the needs of the troubled families within the church. The new pastoral care strategies must be properly articulated and well centered on a revitalization of human relationships within the body of Christ. As noted by Emmanuel [Lartey \(2003, p. 73\)](#), pastoral care seeks to mediate and communicate love across barriers and between people. In fact, [Moyo \(2015, pp. 9–10\)](#) articulates that pastoral care is undertaken on behalf of Jesus Christ to bring the presence of

God to the needs of society in general, and to Christians in particular, as an embodiment of the compassion of God towards everyday social needs. Moyo notes further that the church in its pastoral work must stand in solidarity with those who face challenges in their lives (Moyo 2015, pp. 9–10).

In conclusion, therefore, and in the context of what has been presented above, if the church desires to create an impact on the world by remaining relevant to its members, it must be honest and admit that, indeed, the body of Christ is wounded. It must endeavor to reposition itself by addressing real issues that seem to pose a huge challenge to the body of Christ. It is actually inevitable and imperative that the church engages in serious reflection through sharpening its focus on the purpose and meaning of the pastoral care offered to its members. This entails effective and meaningful pastoral care along dimensions that address human suffering through enhanced and mutual adherence to principles and values of Christian love and commitment. This is true love, which is made explicitly and manifest through care and compassion and which is based on an emphasis on an outreach into the homes of the members. This should also be the manifestation of a deep awareness and sympathy that demonstrates the true perspective of love by the church to the suffering members of the body of Christ. Thus, families should be engaged in the question of how to develop qualitative relationships built on Christian values within the institution of marriage and within the church as a spiritual entity. It is, therefore, the duty of the church to begin teaching its members the purity and sanctity of marriage and of family. Furthermore, that Christian families must not be polluted by any negative practices that seem to devalue the sanctity of marriage and family as required by God. Thus, members must be encouraged to live healthy lifestyles that help them to locate the human conscience to live a disciplined life.

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Note

- ¹ During initiation ceremonies and pre-marital teaching, there are several songs that are taught to young women who are ready to enter into marriage. That a good wife should not at any point deny her husband his conjugal right each time he requests for sex. These songs are demonstrative and every young woman who sings and listens to the songs is thereby reminded of her duty as an ‘obedient’ wife.

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