



Spirit and Solace: Black Churches and Domestic Abuse Final Report

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In memory of Conrad who suddenly passed away in May 2023.

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Abstract

Background: The Spirit and Solace research wanted to find out what it is like for congregants in Black majority churches (BMCs) who report domestic abuse and their experiences of supporting fellow members.

Method: A mixed-methods design that included ongoing reflection along with a survey and interviews/focus groups, researcher diaries, conversations, with a steering group who met every three months during the project.

Results: 35 people participated in the research: 34 as survey respondents; three in a focus group and six in individual interviews. Six participants were church leaders and 13 (38%) had experienced violence/abuse in the past, most had not sought support for experiences and two participants had abused a partner in the past. Most were female (84%), between the ages of 46-55 years old, and of Caribbean/Black British heritage, and had attended weekly church services between nine and over 40 years.

Clergy and churchgoers who participated reported supporting victims/survivors of domestic abuse. Among clergy, two had made referrals to refugees. BMCs are already responding to reports of domestic abuse but with secrecy. Churches are concerned about their branding being tarnished by domestic abuse. This extended to gatekeeping and blocking congregants from participating in the research. Such secrecy about domestic abuse forestalls important conversations for Black women, where congregants also encourage silence as the only route to manage abuse. However, when domestic abuse was addressed in sermons, it encouraged more reports from victims/survivors. Additionally, the safeguarding role is insufficiently implemented within some BMCs. Recommendations and limitations are included.

Executive summary

Domestic abuse continues to be a significant public health concern within the UK and churches play a role as public charities/institutions in preventing, reporting and supporting victims/survivors. The Spirit and Solace research wanted to find out what it is like for congregants in Black majority churches (BMCs) who report domestic abuse and their experiences of supporting fellow members. 35 people participated in the research: 34 as survey respondents; three in a focus group and six in individual interviews. Six participants were church leaders and 13 (38%) had experienced violence/abuse in the past, most had not sought support for experiences and two participants had abused a partner in the past. Most participants were female (84%), between the ages of 46-55 years old, and of Caribbean/Black British heritage, in employment, married and had attended weekly church services between nine and over 40 years.

This study was the first in the UK engage BMC clergy and churchgoers on their practices and support for domestic abuse, finding evidence of good practice in some BMCs. Clergy who participated reported referring victims/survivors to refugees, one supporting churchgoers reporting domestic abuse one to two times a month. Participants who were churchgoers also reported experiences where churches had helped women leave abusive spouses and one survey respondent had experienced good support from her church/leaders when they experienced domestic abuse. During Covid-19 Black majority churches (BMCs) were commended by congregants for tackling domestic abuse.

BMCs are well-loved spaces

Regarding the congregation, participants likened churches to hospitals, A&E, Alcoholics Anonymous for the spiritually sick and broken where they could be “fed” and filled by the words of God in a racially safe spaces. Domestic abuse and historic experiences of child sexual abuse were described as “rampant”, “prevalent” and hidden. Many churches who were approached to participate in the research, were reluctant to grant permission for their churchgoers to speak about experiences where gatekeeping and blocking was experienced during data collection.

BMC leadership styles and management of Domestic Abuse

Participants used binary terms such as Old Testament/New Testament, Little/Big, Umbrella/Independent, Windrush/Post-Windrush to describe the culture and leadership styles within BMCs. Old Testament, Independent, Little and Windrush style churches had leaders who were controlling, dictatorial, some requiring “blind loyalty” and with the expectation that women especially when they are abused by their spouses who are pastors/church leaders should ‘put up and shut up’. Or, leaders facilitate a coverup of cases. Old Testament, Independent, Little and Windrush style churches are also associated with providing

support and disciplinary consequences for men who sexually exploit/abuse children or women by demoting them to the “back row/backseat” of the church as examples of their activism around abuse. However, they were lacking in an effective response to domestic abuse. There is a tendency in BMCs to protect the abuser when he is a minister/church leader. Respondents wanted to caution church leaders to not conceal abuse, abuse their power or force reconciliation with the abusive spouse. New Testament, Umbrella, Big and Post-Windrush style churches were described as more diverse, not only Caribbean or African congregants, and often with leadership with social service professional backgrounds, who could provide good support for reports of domestic abuse and mostly managed these via in-house counsellors. During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns both styles of BMC churches gained new insight into the extent of domestic abuse within their congregation, with leaders visiting homes to help resolve issues.

“Not in our church”

BMCs like all churches tend to want to manage domestic abuse in-house, but are not fully equipped to do so. Church leaders may view asking for outside agency support as evidence of inept leadership, failure to pastor “their flock” or a stain on the reputation of the church/leader or fear “getting it wrong”. Even when churches address domestic abuse in sermons, it tends to be reports about cases “not in our church”. The absence of domestic abuse information on church walls or in sermons means that people who wish to report and seek support, look outside of the church. When churches do include domestic abuse in sermons, more people seek support. This may mean BMC congregants are more ready than church leaders, to tackle domestic abuse in church. Additionally, within BMC churches, safeguarding training and duties are limited to child protection and not domestic abuse or abuse of adults.

Conclusions

BMCs in the UK are evolving as spaces to address domestic abuse and could go much further. BMCs are safe spaces for everything else, but churches need to tackle leadership cultures/styles and widen their remit of support. If churches can help a congregant repair a car and do pre-marital counselling, they can better support domestic abuse. BMCs are already responding to reports of domestic abuse but with secrecy. Churches are concerned about their branding being tarnished by domestic abuse. This runs counter to theological teachings about the church, the life of Jesus and participants’ expectations. Furthermore, secrecy about domestic abuse might be forestalling important conversations for Black women, where congregants encourage internalised strength as the only route to manage domestic abuse. BMC attendance is racialised and race, racism and racialisation can be more explicitly linked to domestic abuse.

The safeguarding role is insufficiently implemented within BMCs. Once church leaders accept BMCs as spaces for addressing domestic abuse, they can sensitise rather than block congregants to participation in research calls. Linked to this is that BMC congregants have professional skills and could be more supported to volunteer on domestic abuse within churches. Discussions about what is permitted within the volunteer/churchgoer roles should be opened by church leaders to assist churchgoers who may struggle with what they can do within the 'spiritual/natural and secular' binary so that they can wear their professional hats and carry out those within church.

Victims/survivors and churchgoers are ready for BMCs to tackle domestic abuse. Those in the data wanted churches to respond better and those in the audience at the dissemination event of over 60 attendees agreed. BMCs could be bolder in managing domestic abuse.

Limitations:

This was a small sample of mostly middle-aged Caribbean/Black British women. It is therefore difficult to generalize to the 500, 000 BMCs within the UK. However, the findings were validated as authentic within the experiences of the over 60 attendees of the dissemination event, many of whom were victim/survivors and in media discussions with pastors. A larger sample and with more victims/survivors could further support/refute findings.

The survey had a complex branching design that could be much more simplified.

The research fellow identified the approach to data collection as in the wrong order. Taking a more traditional participatory and action research route of building relationships through key stakeholders, was an insufficient recruitment strategy. Recruiting BMC communities should initially include facilitating a public event that builds trust to participate, hear the voices of victims/survivors to encourage leaders and BMCs to support the research.

However, the study/dissemination identified and brought together the broader work of victims/survivors/activists within BMCs on domestic abuse in collaboration with social work and specialised agencies. The study further raised domestic abuse in BMCs above the parapet to connect and continue discussions. This also reveals this work has many silos and more could be done to address the silence and secrecy surrounding domestic abuse in BMCs.

Recommendations:

1. BMC leaders can and should do more to address domestic abuse and historic child abuse. It as an issue/concern for congregants.

2. To help more victims/survivors come forward, BMCs should be more public about their domestic abuse support: sermons and signposting. This is a difficult and there is help available from www.bcdaf.org.uk & www.restored-uk.org
3. All church leaders and volunteers should complete full safeguarding training and work with external domestic/child abuse agencies.
4. Church leaders should make space for congregants who are skilled professionals to advise/lead on domestic abuse support, and to help churchgoers unpack the 'spiritual and the secular/natural' dilemma in their roles.
5. Church leaders who are abusers should be reported, removed from leadership and undergo intervention.
6. BMCs should review and revise their leadership styles especially if the culture is the 'old style' dictatorial/controlling approach. This can repeat the harms and mimic the tactics domestic abuse perpetrators, detrimental for victims/survivors.
7. BMC leaders should regularly share with peers, experiences/skills on tackling domestic abuse. BMC leaders/churches' responses to the research are also related to their racialised positions within the UK, where public discussions on domestic/child abuse in African and Caribbean communities remain uncomfortable/shunned. BMCs should also create spaces for these discussions.

Introduction

Domestic Abuse is an enduring problem across communities the world over and involves physical, emotional, sexual, financial control of one intimate partner over the other (Walby, 2004; Davis & Johnson, 2021), and extends to persons related, siblings, in-laws including children (up to the age of 18 years) witnessing abuse (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021). 2.4 million adults were affected by domestic abuse over the previous year ending in March 2022 (1.7 million women and 699,000 men), 5.0% of adults (6.9% women and 3.0% men) (CSEW, 2022). Spiritual abuse can also be part of a person's experience of domestic abuse. Spiritual abuse has been defined as control over a person's ability to observe their faith; fast, pray, read religious texts, attend events or observe religious festivals. Effectively, a denial of the space for religious expression where these are important to a person's sense of identity (Abrahams, Aghtaie & Mulhivill, 2019). Having a faith also includes belonging to a faith community. The person who is perpetrating abuse may also be a respected and valued member of the community and leaving a relationship threatens community membership and has impacts for any children involved (Abrahams et al., 2019). Abrahams et al., (2019) define tactics such as minimising or concealing abuse, found within the current study, to be spiritual abuse. They further remark that although senior faith leaders in the UK rightly condemn domestic abuse, this may not reflect practices in all faith communities.

Women in faith communities are more likely to stay longer in relationships with abusive partners because they believe marriages should not end in divorce (Nason-Clark, 2015; Williams & Jenkins, 2019). Consequences of poor responses from church leaders/congregants to reports of domestic abuse can at worst mean the loss of life through domestic abuse related homicide or delayed access to support. Similar to annual population crime surveys, studies with cross-denominational churchgoers have found high rates of domestic abuse from spouses/partners with poor or mixed responses from clergy to reports of domestic abuse. Clergy also report requiring more training in how to support victims/survivors (Aune & Barnes, 2018; Davis & Johnson, 2021; Westenberg, 2017; Williams & Jenkins, 2019).

This study aimed to identify the experiences, challenges and requirements of Black majority churches to effectively respond to domestic abuse. Black majority churches are churches of any denomination where most of the congregation are of African and/or Caribbean heritage and have an over 100-year history within the UK supporting members experiencing discrimination, including recent migrants (Adedibu, 2013; Adu, 2015; Cappel, 2016). Despite their prolific presence and estimated 500, 000 membership, we know less about how they respond to domestic abuse as they are minimally included in studies carried out in the UK. Heightened reports of domestic abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic 'Lockdown' further indicates the role of churches in community coordinated responses.

Black majority churches in the UK are an under-researched group yet are among the fastest growing Christian organisations. Research with faith communities in the UK on experiences and responses to domestic abuse is an emerging area of interest and activity, with even fewer studies on Black majority church communities. The Covid-19 pandemic further brought the extent of domestic abuse into current focus. This project is the result of existing collaborative work across academic institutions and disciplines, professions, faith communities and violence/abuse practitioners as a key strategy to build trust and access communities to identify approaches to domestic abuse. The project included key stakeholders in regular steering group meetings to review research activities and monitor the progress of the project throughout. Included are researcher reflections throughout as integral to the interpretation of the research process (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Audience feedback and researcher reflections from the dissemination event are also included as data.

Literature Review

Most of the studies on domestic abuse in churches have been carried out in the USA, with a minority from Australia, South Africa and the UK. Although religious worship/faith is a protected characteristic under the UK Equality Act (2010), religious beliefs can be positioned as contradictory to legal and policy expectations. For example, divorce though legal in countries across the world is frowned upon in many Christian communities (see Kanyeredzi, 2021). People with a faith/religious practices negotiate secular/spiritual worlds and roles, and these dual identities can present a moral dilemma when considering how to respond to domestic abuse (Cappel, 2016; Istratii and Ali, 2023). Faith organisations can play a more prominent role in the community coordinated responses to domestic abuse that recognises lots of agencies, healthcare, education, support services, the police, need to work together to support victims and perpetrators of domestic Abuse (Aune & Barnes, 2018; Nason-Clark, Fisher-Townsend, Holtmann and McMullin, 2018). However, statutory and voluntary organisations may view churches as complicit in abuse while churches may construct support services as breaking-up marriages. However, there are promising changes in perspectives within both types of organisations (Williams & Jenkins, 2019; Westenberg, 2017).

Domestic abuse in UK churches

Domestic abuse in UK churches is similar to or higher than rates found in the annual Crime Survey for England and Wales. Radford and Cappel (2002) found 17% of Methodist churchgoers had been victims of domestic abuse – mainly by husbands and partners, poor responses from the church and split loyalties as wives of church-leaders. The Evangelical Alliance (2012) surveyed over 17,000 churchgoers finding 10% of women had experienced physical abuse from partners/spouses and 7% of men admitted being violent. Premier Christianity Today Magazine, together with the Restored Christian Alliance (2013) surveyed 443

churchgoers, 16% had been victims of physical violence. Aune and Barnes together with Restored Christian alliance (2018) surveyed 438 churchgoers in Cumbria. One in four reported abusive behaviour, most commonly emotional abuse among men (42.3%) and women (22.9%) within their current relationship. 15% and especially younger respondents reported experiencing violence in the previous month. Women reported a higher frequency of sexual, financial and spiritual abuse. 70% rated domestic abuse as a bigger problem outside the church than in (37.6%). One in six men and one in four women sought support from a church, of these, over half were positive responses. 318 respondents were asked about church responses to domestic abuse. Most rated that churches did nothing, moderately rated that churches did something or should do more. That churches did good work in response to domestic abuse, was the least common response (Aune & Barnes, 2018). Survey respondents were also asked to rate whether five actions against domestic abuse were carried out within their churches. 57% had experienced preaching and praying about domestic abuse, 50% were unaware that churches displayed material, 65% said churches sometimes donated to refuges and 70% rated churches as rarely donating to or working with domestic abuse agencies (Aune & Barnes, 2018). This supports the findings that churches may be suitable spaces to challenge, support and prevent domestic abuse, but more work is required on responses.

Aunes and Barnes' (2018) survey included a representative sample of Pentecostal but not Evangelical or 'New churches'. Black majority churches though not exclusively, are commonly Evangelical (Adedibu, 2013). Studies from the USA indicate the more Evangelical and traditional the beliefs the poorer the response to reports of domestic abuse and this may also be racialised (Gillum, 2008; Richard, 2017). Black majority churches tend to promote more traditional views about families, headship of the church and marriages (Richard, 2017).

Church attendance, sermons and domestic abuse

Church attendance has been found to be inversely related to currently experiencing domestic abuse (Tracy, 2008; Wang et al., 2009), however this may be either racialised or varies by geographic region. African Americans have high church attendance and this is higher still for African American women, with 83% reporting praying frequently and attending religious worship (Cox & Diamant, 2018). However, even with frequent church attendance, African American women are still more likely to report domestic abuse (Williams & Jenkins, 2019), a racialised contradiction in research findings. Regular church/mosque attendees can reach out to pastors/leaders for counselling and support to leave partners/spouses who are violent with similar findings for example in Pakistan (Ghodrati, Yazdanpanahi and Akbarzadeh, 2019), Brazil (Gonzalez, 2021) and Zimbabwe (Chadambuka, 2022). Women experiencing domestic abuse can also draw on their faith using scriptures to condemn violence and abuse and seek justice (Damron and Johnson, 2015;

Shaikh, 2007). In the current study participants similarly drew on their faith to denounce domestic abuse and negligent church/clergy responses.

In the UK, Black majority churches (BMCs) are increasingly prolific and are an under-researched population (Adedibu, 2013; Adu, 2015; Brierley, 2018; 2020; Goodhew, 2012; Olofinjana, 2018). BMCs work with people who are marginalised by race, immigration status and poverty, intersections also associated with an increased risk of domestic abuse placing these churches in an opportune position to address the topic and signpost churchgoers for further support. Research with faith communities in the UK on experiences and responses to domestic abuse is an emerging area of interest and activity, with limited studies on BMC communities. BMCs enable opportunities for leadership and protection from the criminal justice system of already marginalised men, and when they are abusive/violent to their partners/spouses (Adedibu, 2013; Adu, 2015; Bent-Goodley and Brade Stennis, 2015; Cappel, 2016; Gillum, 2009; Moore et al., 2015; Potter, 2007; Richard, 2017). Women who seek religious spaces to cope with the consequences of past or current abuse fear judgement from congregants and may self-blame when interpreting religious text, yet wish to be supported and be a part of a faith community (Abrahams et al., 2019; Damron and Johnson, 2015; Moore et al., 2015). However, African American women may choose to not report to church leaders because they feel ashamed about victimisation and fear an ineffective response (Williams & Jenkins, 2019; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009; Potter, 2007). In the current study only one victim/survivor reported current domestic abuse, most reports were in the past, indicating church attendance was protective for the sample. Abrahams et al., (2019) has also found faith to be important for victim-survivors of domestic abuse regardless of ethnic or racial background and the importance of faith for victim-survivors is insufficiently acknowledged by support services within the UK. Cappel's (2016) study with 13 UK Black majority church clergy who were also victim-survivors of abuse/violence from spouses, found women were aware of the many support services within society, but felt unentitled to access them. A similar dilemma was reported in the current study. Furthermore, women did not feel supported within the church after experiences of domestic abuse. A finding in a study with 13 female clergy who were supporting women who had experienced domestic abuse in BMCs in the USA (Shaw et al., 2022). The clergy got limited support from wider leadership. This was also a finding in the current study.

Iistratii and Ali's (2023) systematic review of studies across geographical and faith contexts found when clergy include domestic abuse in sermons, receive training on how to defer to religious scriptures to condemn abuse/violence and on safeguarding and a willingness to work with secular services contributed to a more effective response to victims/survivors. Findings in the current study also concurred.

Internalised barriers for victims/survivors with a faith

People who are religious seek help from pastors over and above alternative sources such as support agencies, healthcare and the police etc. usually at the worse point of experiences (Clifton, 2018; Nason-Clark, 2015; Nevhutanda, 2019). Most of the studies with victim-survivors of domestic abuse within churches/faith communities have been carried out with women. Women who seek religious spaces to cope with the consequences of past or current abuse may fear judgement from congregants and self-blame when interpreting religious text, yet still wish to be supported and be a part of a faith community (Damron and Johnson, 2015; Moore et al., 2015). Belonging to a faith group can be a barrier to accessing help and support from secular organisations for violence and abuse and this is also true for BMCs (Bent-Goodley and Brade Stennis, 2015; Damron and Johnson, 2015; Moore et al., 2015). Cappel (2016) conceptualises this as a 'bulimic response': Women congregants who also work in secular organisations, eschew support from such sources because they fear their faith/religion might be scrutinised or do not feel entitled enough as citizens to access services. Additionally, studies with victim-survivors reveal, once a woman begins experiencing violence/abuse from a spouse/partner and is not well-supported by fellow congregants/clergy, her sense of belonging within her church may be eroded by being isolated and this could result in her leaving the church (Potter, 2007; Richard, 2017; Williams & Jenkins, 2019).

Misuse of Biblical texts

One of the tactics of domestic abuse where the abuser is also Christian, is that they misuse Biblical scriptures to justify abuse. Quoting Bible scriptures that example submission (Ephesians 5:22-23) and silence (1 Timothy 2:11-12) that may chime with women's own belief in submission and wanting to be good Christian wives. The more conservative the church, and male control is practiced and endorsed, the increase the likelihood than some men will abuse spouses. Christian women who are abused are less likely to leave or seek support, stay with husbands and self-blame for the abuse (Baird & Gleeson, 2018; Nason-Clark, 2015). In their ABC News 12-month study in Australia with victim-survivors and church leaders, Baird and Gleeson (2018) found abusers applied selective and literal interpretations of Bible scriptures to justify abuse and victim-survivors found sexual, financial, verbal and emotional abuse more difficult to identify without information from websites/flyers. The current study also asked participants about domestic abuse posters/flyers or in sermons in church.

African American women may use prayer to cope with domestic abuse but are less likely to speak to pastors about experiences fearing ministers will be unable to help, breach their confidentiality and feel ashamed about experiences (ElKoury et al., 2004; Mattis et al., 2007; Gillum et al., 2006). In the current study, victim/survivors reported mixed experiences from pastors. Yick (2008) carried out a qualitative meta-synthesis on religious coping and experiences of violence/abuse finding that prayer was a theme.

Coping with violence/abuse from partners/spouses through reading scriptures is illustrated by the experiences of the three Christian women; two Black and one White American, in Nash and Hesterberg's (2009) narrative study. Similar to Yick (2008), the women described using prayer as a method of coping with their husbands' violence and infidelity. One of the Black women sought advice from her sister who kept referring her to religious scripture and praying with her to stay with her abusive husband, advising her to have sex with her husband to resolve the violence. All women eventually left their abusive spouses and reinterpreted scripture they had used to cope. The importance of prayer and the correct use of Biblical scriptures was also reported in this study as well as congregants advising fellow Black women to stay silent about abuse.

Writing from South Africa Chisale (2018) furthers on the role of self-silencing facilitated by religious texts that endorse a patriarchal rule in marriage among African heritage women who experience domestic abuse. Women are more likely to not speak at all about experiences of domestic abuse within their church communities. In some cases women's spouses also attended churches. Domestic abuse can be used by a spouse as justification for the refusal of a woman to submit to the will of her husband is more accepted by men and women in African contexts. In African contexts women and children self-silence to demonstrate respect. Cultural and religious interpretations encourage women in African contexts to stay silent about domestic abuse. Chisale suggests that pastoral care as a sociocultural 'reading' or 'hearing' what the self-silenced victim-survivors have experienced, to discuss 'unstoried narratives', as being both obvious and difficult to decipher. Pastors can offer to share a spaces of silence with victim-survivors, being silent together as solutions both for victim-survivors and perpetrators. Contrastingly the perpetrator's silence is an indication of guilt. These findings are useful when considering how African heritage women in the UK seek help and support for domestic abuse and the of churches. Black and African women staying silent after experiencing domestic abuse was also a theme in the current study and further alluded to with African-British women's experiences during the dissemination event.

Church leadership and domestic abuse

Clifton (2018) argues that Pentecostal churches operate a "Pentecostal gender paradox" where women occupy leadership roles at church and in the wider community but submit to husbands in the home. The submission may be more symbolic than practiced within the home among younger Pentecostals. However, 'patriarchal theology' 'will inevitably enable and conceal domestic violence" (Clifton, 2018, P.77). Cappel (2016) in her interview study with 13 female clergy in Black majority churches in the UK, similarly found churches are very gendered spaces, with men primarily in leadership roles, with violence from partners/spouses low on the agenda. Women are simultaneously included within the structures and community of Black majority churches, albeit in less senior and more traditional feminine, caring roles and

largely excluded from the more strategic activities of church leadership. Women are also excluded from the instruction of biblical texts. Therefore, male power prevailed regardless of whether women also share senior leadership responsibilities, arguments echoed by Adedibu (2013), Gillum (2008) and Richard (2017) in reference to Black majority churches in the USA.

Having a faith also includes belonging to a faith community. The person who is perpetrating abuse may also be a respected and valued member of the community and leaving a relationship threatens community membership with impacts if there are children involved. Jewish, Muslim and some Catholic women further fear that secular support agencies will not understand their faith (Abrahams et al., 2019). Women of faith who are victim-survivors of domestic abuse can be caught between, belonging to faith communities, submission to husbands, fears for the safety of their children and their own interpretations of spiritual redemption. This means that they may stay silent about abuse, fear responses from secular agencies or be pressured to stay with abusive partners (Abrahams et al., 2019). In Potter's (2007) study women attributed their turning point for leaving, or their partner leaving, to God. or supporting women managing domestic abuse using prayer and Christian counselling was a theme in the current study. 'Spiritualising' was the term used for spiritual abuse or exploiting a person's faith to further control them or when leaders conceal/minimise abuse by fellow leaders.

How victim-survivors of domestic abuse are responded to by clergy

Churchgoers who are also victim-survivors of domestic abuse report being ignored, not well responded to even after, repeated reports and when abusers were also pastors, they are moved to another province/city (Nason-Clark et al., 2018) in Canada, in BMCs in South Africa (Nevhutanda, 2019) and the USA (Richard, 2017). When women report domestic abuse to pastors they are encouraged to stay, pray and be patient and not divorce. Church leaders may also advise women to not to report partners to the police in some cases and in others, women are blamed for provoking partners/spouses. In Baird and Gleeson's study (2018) there were many examples where women were told to be patient with abusive spouses and one told to leave the church because the pastor could not protect her from her husband, with women eventually leaving their husbands and the church. Furthermore, in the Australian enquiry into family violence (2016) with 938 submissions, when women reported to churches, frequent poor responses, many ignorant of how to refer or effectively respond (Baird & Gleeson, 2018). Submission was also rife in Pentecostal churches where women were advised to separate but not divorce and to have sex with husbands to resolve issues (Baird & Gleeson, 2018). Previous research findings from the USA indicate clergy may either encourage African American women to stay in relationships with men who are violent, or there are no conversations, or referral processes to relevant support agencies within churches (Garfield, 2005; Nash, 2005; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009; Potter, 2007; Richard, 2017). In Potter's (2007) study with African American women, 8

out of the 40 women interviewed sought help from clergy. Nearly all were advised to return to their marriages, women left the church as a result. Of the women who did not seek help from clergy, some observed how the clergy had dealt with other abused women and decided not to approach them for help or thought they would not be believed. Their partners also restricted church attendance or they had a feeling that the church would not help. Of the Muslim women interviewed four out of five were supported by fellow members of their mosques and in one case members removed a woman's husband from the family home. Richard (2017) interviewed eight women victim-survivors whose spouses/perpetrators of abuse were Black majority church clergy and found ineffective responses from church leadership, secrecy in the church, where male abusers would be temporarily removed from service only to be later re-instated or relocated to churches in a different state to resume clergy work. Richard argued that Black Majority churches' theological interpretation of the Bible passages was too selective and literal and used to justify domestic abuse. BMC Clergy responses was a key theme in this study, where victims/survivors were better supported if partners/spouses were external to the church and similar to the above, when the abuser was a church leader.

Clergy perspectives on domestic abuse support

It is well-established that churches guided by theological interpretations of marriage seek to keep relationships intact or conceal or minimise abuse especially when the abuser is a church leader (Nason-Clark, 2015; Baird and Gleeson, 2018). This is consistent in research findings with clergy and congregants in Black majority churches in the USA (Gillum, 2009; Bent-Goodley and Brade Stennis, 2015; Richard, 2017). Pastors may prioritise keeping marriages together over the safety of victim-survivors, may offer couples counselling for both spouses where one is the abuser endangering women's lives, may not report abusive men to the police, do not discuss domestic abuse in the sermons, underestimate the extent of domestic abuse in congregation and require more training on domestic abuse (Dyer, 2016; Nason-Clark, 2015; Williams & Jenkins, 2019; Zust, Housley and Klatke, 2017). Black majority churches negotiate already fragile reputations within communities and fear the consequences of disproportionate or inequitable agency intervention (Cappel, 2016; Davis and Johnson, 2021; Williams & Jenkins, 2019). Dempsey, Kent Butler and Gaither (2016) discuss a lack of trust between Black Churches in the USA and mental health professionals and the importance of building trust. Building trust with BMCs was a significant challenge in the current study, despite both the PI and RF belonging to BMC and working in a collaborative Christian network. Black majority churches may similarly oppress Black women with advice to 'stay and pray' in relationships with violent men or create a culture that makes it difficult or unsafe for women to speak about experiences of violence and abuse (Bent-Goodley & Brade

Stennis, 2015; Gillum, 2008). This also means that abuse by Black men, including when they form part of the clergy, goes unchallenged and under-reported (Bent-Goodley & Brade Stennis, 2015; Moore et al., 2015; Richard, 2017). This was also a finding in the current study.

Training and supporting BMC Clergy

Studies with mostly female clergy have found clergy are either unwilling or lack training (Bent-Goodley, St. Vil and Hubert, 2012; Gillum, 2009) or the ability to engage with outside agencies to help women (Davis & Dreyer, 2017). Nevhutanda (2019) interviewed 14 church leaders and 10 women victim survivors in South Africa and found a lack of knowledge about domestic abuse and a feeling of helplessness. Victim-survivors did not want their abusive partners to be exposed in church and pastors' experiencing difficulty in challenging abusive men especially when they are in positions of power within the church. Other themes were that pastors chose to stay out of 'other men's business', did not want to attract a bad image of the church and did not address domestic abuse in sermons. However, most would refer to specialised services but did not know any or how to do this and there were no support systems for pastors who counselled victim-survivors. Furthermore, pastors lacked formal training in counselling skills (Nevhutanda, 2019). Similar findings on victims/survivors and clergy concealing abuse were reported in the current study.

Williams and Jenkins (2019) in their study with 112 Black majority church leaders and lay pastors who were mostly male and over 50 years (Baptist, Christian non-denominational, Pentecostal or Church of God in Christ (COGIC), found churches may underestimate the numbers of members who experience domestic abuse. Black clergy agreed churches should intervene and prevent domestic abuse. Pastors thought domestic abuse was insufficiently addressed in sermons and some still offered couples therapy and that there was no risk/safety assessment. Respondents wanted more training for church leaders. Responses to reports of domestic abuse included in the order scoring, counselling victims, couples counselling and counselling the abuser. 20% thought that the pastor did a safety/risk assessment, but only occasionally was a perpetrator asked to leave the congregation, over half thought victims would be offered assistance and over a third thought the victim would be referred to an agency. Most of the pastors (58%) were dissatisfied with their church's responses to domestic abuse and wanted churches to work more closely with specialised agencies, and similar to Nevhutanda's (2019) study in South Africa, did not know about specialised support agencies. A minority (20%) frequently worked with agencies. Findings could also indicate that congregants less frequently report domestic abuse to pastors (Williams & Jenkins, 2019). This study reported similar themes.

Conversely, even where clergy are trained, they fear they are still ill-prepared to effectively respond (Drumm et al., 2018). This indicates church leaders may require ongoing support. In

summary Black Majority church spaces though useful as resources to tackle public health issues such as HIV, obesity and sexual health (Stewart, 2014) may not yet sufficiently courageous, ready or equipped to make a stance against violence /abuse (Moore et al., 2015). Overwhelmingly male leadership in churches and especially in Black majority churches could reflect the lower priority of violence from spouses/partners in the church/sermon agenda (Adedibu, 2013; Cappel, 2016; Richard, 2017; Westenberg, 2017). Studies with clergy and victim-survivors report a lack of training in how to respond to reports of violence from spouses/partners (Brade, 2009; le Roux & Loots, 2017; Richard, 2017; Williams & Jenkins, 2019, see also Iistratii and Ali, 2023).

Domestic abuse interventions for churches

A consistent recommendation is for churches to tackle violence from partners/spouses in sermons where there is a captive audience and to use Bible scriptures to facilitate this (Aune & Barnes, 2018; Gillum, 2008; Fortune & Enger, 2005; Richard, 2017; Williams & Jenkins, 2019). This should send the message of zero-tolerance to violence/and abuse to perpetrators, encourage victim/survivors to seek support and more effective responses from congregants. Promising interventions in the USA include: START; Silence Talk about it Alert the public Refer Train (START) yourselves and (Stennis, Fischle, Bent-Goodley, Purnnel and Williams, 2015) and SHARE; Step 1: define the problem. Step 2: identify risk and protective factors. Step 3: develop and test prevention strategies, and Step 4: assure widespread adoption (Wagman et al., 2012:1392).

Kim and Menzie (2015) suggest having a Faith Leader Advisory Group in churches to create a sense of ownership and to identify as change-makers, not only as recipients of training. In a similar vein, Green (2015) recommends institutional champions. Faith organisations should also be regularly surveyed for policies on domestic abuse. In a cross-faith survey, few churches had policies Green (2015). In the UK Aune and Barnes along with Restored Christian Alliance (2018) similarly suggest recording reports of domestic abuse, responding effectively to build trust among victim/survivors and speaking about domestic abuse in sermons and having champions to facilitate effective responses as well as training of leadership and partnership working with support agencies. This requires a multi-pronged approach involving ongoing multi-agency work to facilitate effective responses as domestic abuse is a complex issue.

A response connected to the current study, was a collaboration of academics, practitioners and pastors with a common interest in church responses to reports of domestic abuse have established the Black Church Domestic Abuse Forum (BCDAF). Convened in 2016, we have devised a toolkit; a guidance document, training and evaluation and have received ethical approval from the UEL REC. We have piloted

the domestic abuse training and evaluation tailored to and delivered by faith leaders in Black majority churches and from November 2020 across the UK.

Knowledge contribution UK BMC victim survivor responses

The study aimed to contribute to knowledge in identifying victim-survivor's perspectives within UK Black majority churches, and church leaders and congregants' experiences of reporting and supporting those who endure domestic abuse. Victim-survivors' perspectives on how they would like to be supported, as well as reflections from church members on experiences of providing support, can be used to assess the effectiveness of church responses to safeguard lives and inform improvements.

Aims:

The aims of the current study were to identify Black majority church leaders and congregants' experiences of reporting, supporting and referring victim-survivors to support agencies, to assess the effectiveness of baseline training and institutional inclusion in wider community co-ordinated efforts to end domestic abuse. This was intended to be achieved by focus groups and interviews recruited via a survey, that would also identify areas of good practice and those that could be further developed.

Objectives:

The objectives of the study were:

1. To develop a guide for clergy on supporting victim-survivors of domestic abuse in Black majority churches, identify good practices and those that could be improved, and use this to increase knowledge, responses and early intervention.
2. To map awareness and experience of domestic abuse within Black majority church communities, support and referral to specialised agencies from an online survey of up to 1000 respondents. These data were intended to provide the bases to assess whether further interventions and multi-agency working are required.
3. To identify good practices of reporting/supporting domestic abuse in Black majority churches and those that could be improved and use this to develop a guide for health, social care and support agencies on working with Black majority churchgoers who experience domestic abuse. Data from the online survey, interviews and focus groups was intended to provide the basis for this guide.

Methodology

Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design that included ongoing reflection (see Braun and Clarke, 2022) along with the survey and interviews/focus groups, researcher diaries, conversations and progress reports with a steering group who met every three months during the project. Participating churches were invited to nominate a churchgoer or church leader to join the steering group. Involvement of stakeholders who are affected by the research is part of the action research methodology adopted by the study: Action research effects change via practitioners/researchers working with a group on an agreed issue of concern, designing an intervention, reflecting on and evaluating the intervention to decide whether further actions are required (McNiff, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). This participatory aspect of the design was intended to capture diverse perspectives, and interpretations of the data, develop an approach for 'working with' people from groups that are marginalised within society. Part of this process was to build trust with groups of interest (Dempsey et al., 2016). Both the principal investigator (PI) and the research fellow (RF) had volunteered with the BCDAF for a combined total of five years, before the commencement of the study. We were embedded in a network of key stakeholders who were clergy, congregants of BMCs with a common interest in how domestic abuse is responded to in churches. This included the PI co-presenting webinars and podcasts on domestic abuse for BMCs. The participatory and reflexive aspect of the design became key during the data collection stage (further outlined below) to understanding the low response rate to the survey, gatekeeping and blocking experienced during the study.

Data Collection

When the project proposal was submitted, the official launch of the BCDAF in January 2021 had been ear-marked as a key recruitment opportunity for the survey. However, the successful outcome of the funding application occurred after the event. The nearly 200 attendees were subsequently informed of the study and that a link would be placed on the BCDAF website. There were multiple well-placed opportunities to promote the survey: a webinar about the Domestic Abuse Act that included the PI, and the now Domestic Abuse Commissioner on the panel in May 2021, an invited keynote in June 2021 on faith and domestic abuse, the PI co-created-presented a series of webinars on domestic abuse with a BMC pastor on a platform accessed by over 10,000 people as part of the women's ministry of a major UK BMC. Additionally, an interview panel on Premier Christian Radio and conference presentation on domestic abuse at the University of East London both in November 2021, both subsequently presented by the RF. A page about the research was uploaded to the BCDAF website with a link to the survey and shortly afterwards a WordPress website and Facebook (Meta) were specifically created for the study. The BCDAF also shared the survey link to their mailing list and training attendees and the survey link was shared widely among the PI's and research fellow's networks including social media such as Twitter and snowballing. These efforts

resulted in 18 respondents. The survey completion remained at 18 respondents until February 2022 when the PI resumed work on the project.

Quarterly Steering group meetings were conducted throughout the project to keep the project on track to include the perspectives of key stakeholders. All steering group meetings, and data collection took place online. Data collection occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions where only online interviews were permitted by the PI's hosting institution (see further below).

Data collection began in April 2021 and concluded in December 2022. Shortly after recruiting the research fellow (RF) in July 2021, who carried out most of the data collection, the PI became unwell, was hospitalised, almost lost their life and discharged with a chronic long term illness diagnosis. The PI subsequently took six months leave from their substantive role and the project from the project to recover, returning fully in September 2022 after a phased return to work.

Steering group (Research Fellow's Reflexivity)

Prior to current study, both the Research Fellow (RF) and the PI had conducted research into sensitive subjects: sexual/domestic abuse, violence and race. Both are accustomed to the silences that can exist when people are called upon to speak about their lived experiences of sexual violence, domestic abuse the often-negative impact of racialisation upon their personhood.

It follows that recruiting participants for such research studies, tends to mean a long-drawn-out process. Often, especially in regarding research which explores race, once fortunate enough to interview one participant with a level of rapport and trust, that same once hesitant participant, will go onto recommend a friend and or direct the researcher to another person whom they think would be interested in taking part in the study.

When conducting research into sexual abuse and violence, silence, due to participants' feelings of shame and guilt are expected hurdles. One route to engaging victim-survivors of sexual violence has been through sexual violence support agencies. These agencies have a long tradition of support and advocacy to victim-survivors of sexual violence/domestic abuse. As such, when they act as gatekeepers to potential study participants, it can be arguably seen as having their service-users best interest at heart and rightfully to mitigate against research studies causing 'any further harm' to the people they represent and support.

When the data collection stage for the current study began, the researchers were aware from previous studies both in the UK and abroad, including our own experience of working with sexual violence and abuse, that we would face similar challenges when recruiting participants (c.f Kanyeredzi, 2014; Wilson, J., 2016).

Therefore, the steering group component was an integral part of the research design. Popular in participatory action research the purpose of a steering group is twofold: firstly, to enable researchers to gain access to research participants and secondly, to act as an accountability partner ensuring the trust and integrity of the ongoing research (Dempsey et al., 2016). Having experts, such as church leaders and elders steeped in BMCs maintained an ethical standpoint for the study. As such, the steering group were shown and advised on the questionnaires, interview guides, and were intended to advise on best routes to data collection. As such the study framework leaned toward participatory action, designed to be conducted with churches, church leaders, churchgoers not about or against churches and their members.

However, the steering group despite knowledge about BMCs, set a trend which continued throughout the data collection period. Where steering group members initially displayed a level of enthusiasm to participate, that very enthusiasm disappeared. Meetings were arranged, yet members did not attend or only one member attended. Luckily, the survey had a question which asked if respondents wished to join the steering group. It was those members (churchgoers) recruited via the survey whom we did not know, who were more enthusiastic to meet and discuss and aid with the ongoing project, more than people (so called experts/leaders) who were in our network prior to the study beginning.

Members were not attending the meetings which equated to let's "Give it up to God vs research and activism". This opinion expressed on several occasions, by church leaders and those in positions of authority in BMC's, and the lack of enthusiasm of steering group members acted as a form of 'gatekeeping' preventing recruitment of study participants. Where sexual violence support agencies, used gatekeeping to ensure the wellbeing of their clients, yet encouraged them to speak to promote social change, this was not the case with the steering group.

In total six steering group meetings were held, the final taking place after the data collection and analysis that occurred after the dissemination event (described after the findings).

Online Survey

An online survey with scope for descriptive answers (see Appendix) was designed to gather up to 1000 churchgoers and clergy experiences of reporting/supporting domestic abuse over a nine-month period. Due to the PI's illness, this was extended to 20 months. The survey was planned to be piloted with victim-survivors. A contact from the PI's network who had a panel of victim survivors to pilot the survey, did not respond to requests to attend the steering group meetings. Eventually the survey, interview and focus group questions, were piloted with members from the steering group, who included those with domestic abuse experiences, clergy and churchgoers. A total of seven pilot participants responded by stating the survey/interview questions were clear and some provided further comments, mostly about the

technical errors in the survey, the branching of the questions depending on whether the respondent was churchgoer or clergy, and errors such as the age-range, that had initially excluded 18–35-year-olds (corrected after the pilot). Two important changes to the survey included two questions that asked respondents to define domestic abuse and whether they had perpetrated domestic abuse.

The survey was the main source of recruitment of participants, both clergy and churchgoers and for the qualitative interviews and focus groups. The qualitative interviews intended to examine the role of faith/spirituality/spaces in experiences of violence and abuse and aimed to recruit up to 20 participants. Focus groups were intended to capture clergy experiences of responding to reports of domestic abuse from churchgoers and aimed to recruit up to 30 participants. Focus groups were also designed to provide an opportunity for church leaders to share experiences and learn from each other.

Recruitment for the survey involved the RF compiling a database of over 100 BMCs. Each church was sent an email containing the study information. This was followed up with a telephone call to ascertain the best person to speak with (safeguarding officer/ Leader/ DA Counsellor). One church had a department for domestic abuse. Interestingly, when the RF called the church which had advertised having a domestic abuse service, no one was aware of this service, even though it was offered on their website. Some churches are organised as into main and smaller umbrella churches. Umbrella churches had a central number for head office where the main Pastor of the organisation could be reached.

The aim was to build rapport with the named person, discuss any concerns about the study they might have and ultimately get them to distribute the survey amongst their congregants. Pastors were also advised to complete the survey themselves to ensure it was fit for their congregations and some did. Endless rounds ensued, of being given a contact name, resending email, and then being told they would speak with the Leader Pastor and come back to me.

When fortunate to speak with the 'right' person, lengthy and very interesting conversations were held between Leaders and the RF. All agreed that DA was an important issue and that they would happily distribute the survey to their congregations. Pastors told us they dealt with domestic abuse, asked us to make appointments and send the survey links, but nothing happened. When we could not reach anyone by phone visited churches and gave out survey link and study information. I looked like an insider (Black and Christian) until I mentioned 'domestic abuse' at which point they couldn't wait to get away from me.

Only two out of the hundred churches contacted via the database directly said, "they were not interested" during the initial telephone call. Numerous others said, "would pass it to the leaders, or were very interested, and would definitely take part in the research". None came back. In summing up, churches

paid 'lip service' to participating, eventually, blocking and gatekeeping potential participants from speaking of domestic abuse. Surprisingly, this was also, the case with the initial members of the steering group whom we had a previous relationship with.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the research was granted by University of East London research ethics committee before the application for funding for the study. Permission was sought from participants for all aspects of data usage and each was informed of how their data would be stored with space to address questions/concerns before data collection began. Participants were free to choose to not answer questions or withdraw participation/data from the study. Focus groups participants were briefed to not disclose names or identifying information about churchgoers who they have supported. The main ethical challenge of the study was maintaining confidentiality of participants because of the small community of BMCs within the UK. Though sizeable in numbers, BMCs are still small communities within communities and every effort was made to keep participants' details anonymous including any identifying details of church and pastors. A list of useful support contacts was offered to all participants.

Another ethical challenge experienced was in the preparation for the dissemination event, journalists were requesting research participants with lived experiences of domestic abuse to provide commentary for articles. We offered and discussed that this was voluntary and would no longer make their participation in the research anonymous this with a few research participants who had already publicly disclosed abuse experiences. None took the offer. However, through these discussions, we were put in touch with BMC victim/survivors who took up the offer of appearing in media articles. We briefed the women of the voluntary and public nature of their participation in media interviews. The women had already gone public with their lived experiences, some had established support services for women for Christian women and were well supported.

All participants were informed that if they disclose information indicating a current safeguarding issue, researchers would be duty bound to report to relevant agencies. Participants disclosed more past and some recent experiences of domestic abuse without indication of current safety risk. All data was treated with the strictest confidence, processed and analysed on password protected computers, with data only accessible to research team members. Survey participants did opt into interviews/focus groups and some into the steering group (discussed above). Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded with the permission of participants. The audio recordings were destroyed after satisfactorily transcribed. Participant details were kept in separate locations to anonymised data in a locked cupboard, in the PI's a locked office or in separate folders on a UEL OneDrive.

A data management plan and risk assessment was approved for the project (August 2019). The PI is responsible for the data management. The data will be stored and reviewed on a 5-yearly basis by the PI for future access/analysis. During the project the PI moved institutions. The small dataset will be kept securely on OneDrive at the PI's current institution and is anonymized and will be available on request.

Procedure

For the online survey, respondents were screened with a question that checked they had regularly attended a BMC, the consent form was included that they checked in agreement. The survey asked respondents whether they also wanted to be interviewed or take part in a focus group (church leaders only). Respondents who left emails for survey/focus group participation were followed up, initially mostly by the RF and towards the end of the project also by the PI. Suitable times were arranged with participants and email conversations to confirm dates and times. Most of the study was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions all individual interviews were carried out via MS Teams. To protect the participants' anonymity and researcher boundaries, a separate research smart phone was purchased by the PI, to arrange phone calls to churches during recruitment and interviews. All interviewees were recorded using the smartphone and had transcribed. MS Teams was used to mimic a face-to-face conversation and facilitated eye-contact and rapport. Interviewees were welcomed, thanked for sharing their time and expertise and informed about the study, sent the consent and information sheets and given time to read and return them before the interviews began. Interviewees were offered typed anonymised transcripts to read and correct. None requested correction of their transcripts. The focus group was arranged in person a lockdown- restrictions had lifted. This took a lot of organisation as there were many elapsed months between initial interviews and focus group. We lost two possible attendees due to multiple clashes with schedules. For the focus group, interviewees were welcomed to UEL with teas/coffees snacks and proceeded to the interview room. Interviewees were reminded of the confidential nature of the study and discussion and to refrain from naming individuals. Interviewees were asked whether they had questions and were offered the consent and information sheets to read and sign. The focus group began and ran for over an hour with one interruption. Interviewees welcomed the space and the safety created for them to speak freely about experiences, one describing the focus group as cathartic. At the end of both interviews and focus groups participants were thanked for their participation and later invited to the dissemination event.

Participants

There were 35 participants in the research: 34 as survey respondents; three in a focus group and six in individual interviews. Six participants were church leaders and 13 (38%) had experienced violence/abuse in the past, most had not sought support for experiences and two participants had abused a partner in the past. The majority of participants were female (84%), between the ages of 46-55 years old, and of

Caribbean/Black British heritage, in employment, married and had attended weekly church services between nine and over 40 years. Two more church leaders and three more people wanted to take part in individual interviews wanted to participate in the focus groups, but we could not arrange a suitable time. A conservative estimate of at least 100, and potentially 40% response rate was expected.

BCDAF had offered to fund £20 shopping vouchers for interview participants in recognition of their time. However, during the course of the project, the funders for the BCDAF training had informed of a funding freeze for projects. Therefore, the PI funded shopping vouchers for the interview participants. The UK BMC community is a small one and we were invested in protecting the identities of participants. Therefore, participants were allocated an initial, age range and role in the current study (see Table 1 below).

Participant	Age-Range	Role in BMC	Interview/Focus group
K	45-55	Churchgoer	Interview
P	56-65	Churchgoer	Interview
C	45-55	Churchgoer/leader	Interview/Focus group
A	45-55	Churchgoer/leader	Interview/Focus group
T	45-55	Churchgoer/leader	Interview/Focus group
N	45-55	Churchgoer	Interview

TABLE 1 PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Analytic Approach

MS Excel and SPSS 28 were used to analyse descriptive statistics. Survey data were exported to MS Excel and initial analyses carried out on the demographics and responses. SPSS was used to further understand the descriptive statistics and investigate in-depth how questions were responded to and relationships between variables.

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; 2022) was applied to the qualitative data for the survey open ended answers, interviews and focus group data. A reflexive thematic analysis is one where the entire process of research is approached from the perspective of learning and adapting while in process. This reflexive work is included in the data as it influences what is interpreted from both the research process and participants' accounts (Braun and Clarke, 2022). These qualitative data were transcribed verbatim, mostly by the RF then read and re-read by the RF and PI, and analysed by the PI. Transcripts were

exported to MS Excel and annotated (Braun and Clarke, 2022); each were line-by-line coded and any initial thoughts and phrases, annotated in the column adjacent with a short paragraph for each transcript of the main narrative. The codes were identified both from answers to questions in the interview guide and reviewing in-depth, the answers for any additional data offered by participants. Participants offered conceptualisations far beyond the expectations of both the PI and RF that enriched our understandings of the role of BMCs in participants' lives and how domestic abuse experiences and responses knitted into these. Themes were identified and checked across each transcript and attention paid to how the theme originated and developed throughout each and then across all transcripts/qualitative responses from the survey. Once terms/themes such as 'the back row', 'Old Testament church' were identified, each transcript was re-read and coded in respect of each new theme and how it developed within each transcript and further whether these were included in the qualitative responses from the survey. This iterative back-and-forth brought the PI proximity to the data as this process had been their only contact with most of the transcripts/interviews. Once the PI was at the point of data saturation, an initial draft write-up was created. The PI then met with the RF to discuss the themes identified and the RF agreed that the narrative shared by the PI matched their experience of data collection, transcription and re-reading. This was an important aspect of the analysis because outside of the lower-than-expected survey responses, the RF and PI had not shared many conversations about the data collection. It was during this discussion and in the planning of the Learning and Sharing Event (described below) that the PI identified that the themes from the analysis helped to explain that the issues experienced during data collection. The PI suggested the RF provide a reflexive account of the blocking and gatekeeping (see Steering Group above) they experienced during the data collection as part of the findings from the research. This would help to frame themes identified during the analysis and to give context to the findings.

It was intended that interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2009) would be applied to sections of the data that capture lived experiences of domestic abuse and within faith spaces. However, half of the interview participants were church leaders who were also interviewed on their churchgoer experiences, some who disclosed experiences of domestic/sexual abuse. Participants with lived experiences of domestic abuse preferred the anonymity of the survey and after coding, it was decided that a reflexive thematic analysis was the best fit for most of the data. Sections of the data will be revisited when drafting manuscripts for publication especially on BMC spaces.

Dissemination

The dissemination of the initial findings was effective and successful. In initial meetings with the PR consultant we discussed the marketing of the event, flyer that was drafted and then professionally designed (see [Appendix 2](#)) and panel discussants. The PR made suggestions who the PI approached. One of the

potential panel discussants who was approached and was very positive about the event, was unable to attend but offered prayers and good wishes. During the planning of the event a person in the PI's personal network introduced an author who had recently published a book of poems with victims/survivors of domestic abuse most who had attended BMCs. The PI decided to include the poets/book in the publicity and the event. This offered a further opportunity to domestic abuse experiences from victims/survivors who had attended/attend BMCs. The steering group were also consulted for feedback on the event, line-up, and program. The PR drove interest in the event, adapted the summary findings into a press summary. The PI carried out two radio interviews on BBC Regional stations. The dissemination event was featured on *Premier Christian Radio*, the PI wrote an article for *Premier Christianity Magazine* and articles about the study/findings were published in *The Voice Newspaper* and *Keep The Faith Magazine* (see [References/Dissemination articles section](#)). The project website <https://spiritandsolace.com/> will remain live with updates of dissemination activities. The PI and RF will after consultation with the victims/survivor community we engaged at the Dissemination Event (described below) draft the two guides: A Guide for church leaders on how victim- survivors of domestic abuse want to be supported within Black majority churches. A Guide for health, social care and support agencies to working with Black majority churchgoers who are victim/survivors of domestic abuse and Black majority church communities. We will continue to draft submissions of the research findings to *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, *Journal of Gender Based Violence*, *Journal of Social Work* and *Christianity British Journal of Social Work*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* and *Against Women*.

Topics will include: Domestic Abuse in UK Black Majority Churches, Tackling domestic abuse in UK Black Majority Churches, How responsive are Black Majority Churches to Domestic Abuse? Findings from a UK study The Domestic Abuse Responsive Church, Working victims of domestic abuse who belong to Black Majority Churches, Beyond submission: How Black Majority Church leaders support victims of domestic abuse, A zero-tolerance church? How Black Majority Churches are working to end domestic abuse Pastoral care for domestic abuse in UK Black Majority Churches.

We will also write a Monograph from the study: Spirit and Solace: UK Black majority churches and domestic abuse. Potential Publishers: Policy Press, Emerald, Routledge, Palgrave MacMillan and Bloomsbury who regularly publish monographs on violence/abuse studies.

Dissemination Event

This event was intended as a space to digest the research findings for stakeholders and participants. Given the RF's experience of gatekeeping and blocking during data collection, and to ensure the success of the dissemination event, the PI decided to use part of the budget to employ the services of a public relations consultant (PR) who specialised in BMC communities.

The dissemination event was attended by over 60 people. We began with a background to the study and then the RF presented a reflexive account of the blocking and gatekeeping they experienced during the data collection and then described the data collection process. The PI discussed the finding (below), followed by live poetry from people with lived experiences of domestic abuse including two men.

The panel responded to the findings, one questioned how far we had approached BMCs to participate. Others were sympathetic about the blocking and gatekeeping. The discussions surrounded the dynamics in BMCs, the differences in culture between African led and Caribbean led churches. The floor was opened and there were lots of testimonies from women-victim survivors, some who has established their own charities in response to the lack of support from pastors in their churches. One of the members of the BCDAF empathised with the gatekeeping and blocking described by the RF and reflected that this had also been experienced in their work with BMC leaders. One woman gave a powerful testimony of recent experience of domestic abuse from her husband who was also in a BMC. The audience offered gratitude for the space to come together and share experience and expertise, some suggesting an annual event. The RF shared that had the research began with the dissemination event, perhaps the responses would have been better. This would have been a better method of building trust with BMC leaders. The audience and panel discussions concluded the data collection and project was difficult, but the event was a good beginning for further work. An anonymous Padlet (see Figure 1 below) was shared so that attendees who did not wish to speak could air their perspectives.

The event was hosted three days before the PI left their institution to take up another role, and on the day, had to pack their belongings. Before setting up time for the beautiful lecture hall where the event would be held the RF and PI stopped for a meal to mark the end of a difficult project and the preparations for the dissemination event. Attendees started began to arrive fifteen minutes before the start of the event. There were over 60 attendees, including church leaders and victim-survivors. We welcomed them, mostly women who continued to pile into the room. The PI reflected that for the past thirteen years they had been aiming for safe spaces for conversations on Black women's lived experiences of violence/abuse including racism. The dissemination event was one such space.

The PI introduced the panel, the journey of the project, then a poet performed on her experience of domestic abuse and shared that she had created a charity to offer training to church leaders. Then over to the RF who spoke powerfully about being blocked, leaving feelings of rejection (detailed above). The RF's reflexive account deeply resonated with the audience who offered lots of knowing 'uhms' in agreement. The PI introduced and explained the findings after which the audience erupted with applause and a natural break followed, much earlier than planned. Women immediately rushed over to the RF in support. After the

impromptu break, another powerful offering of live poetry on domestic abuse, from a young woman who as a child had witnessed abuse. On to the panel who elaborated churches are places of salvation and not hospitals. Further points are summarized below:

There was regret about the rejection experienced by the RF and agreements that BMCs need to change their responses to domestic abuse. One panelist remarked that the project team did not do enough to recruit Nigerian churches and that God hates domestic abuse, more than he hates divorce. There were countless examples of how culture, marriage and social status intersected to keep women in marriages with abusive spouses. Another panelist offered how to care for the self after divorce.

The panel shared so much more. The audience was full of victim/survivors, one who gave a powerful testimony about her recent domestic abuse experience. Another, of how her church kept counselling her to stay with her abusive husband, prompting her to leave and establish a support service for women in similar circumstances. There were many and similar contributions where women had escaped domestic abuse and created their own support organisations. A space was also made for the RF and PI to address questions from the audience on the Padlet (see Figure 1 below). The audience concluded that although it appeared to the research team that they were at the end of their project this was the beginning of something with a much wider scope. To close there were two poems, both from men: about witnessing domestic abuse as a child and experiencing domestic abuse from a spouse, the other was a piece created during the event. In response to a question from the Padlet (below). The RF reflected that projects such as this where communities feel both under surveillance and marginalised, research should begin with a 'Learning and Sharing Event'. At the start of the current study the project the team thought they were already embedded within strong networks with connections to BMC. A lack of trust within our (Black) communities was perhaps the biggest block to data collection. The audience agreed to stay in touch, were encouraging and appreciative of the project/findings. The event was scheduled to last an hour and a half. Four and a half hours later, we were being gently ushered out of the building by security staff.

In summary, the PI, RF and the attendees were completely blown away by the event. Not in our wildest research dreams had we expected such a rich panel and audience participation and feedback.

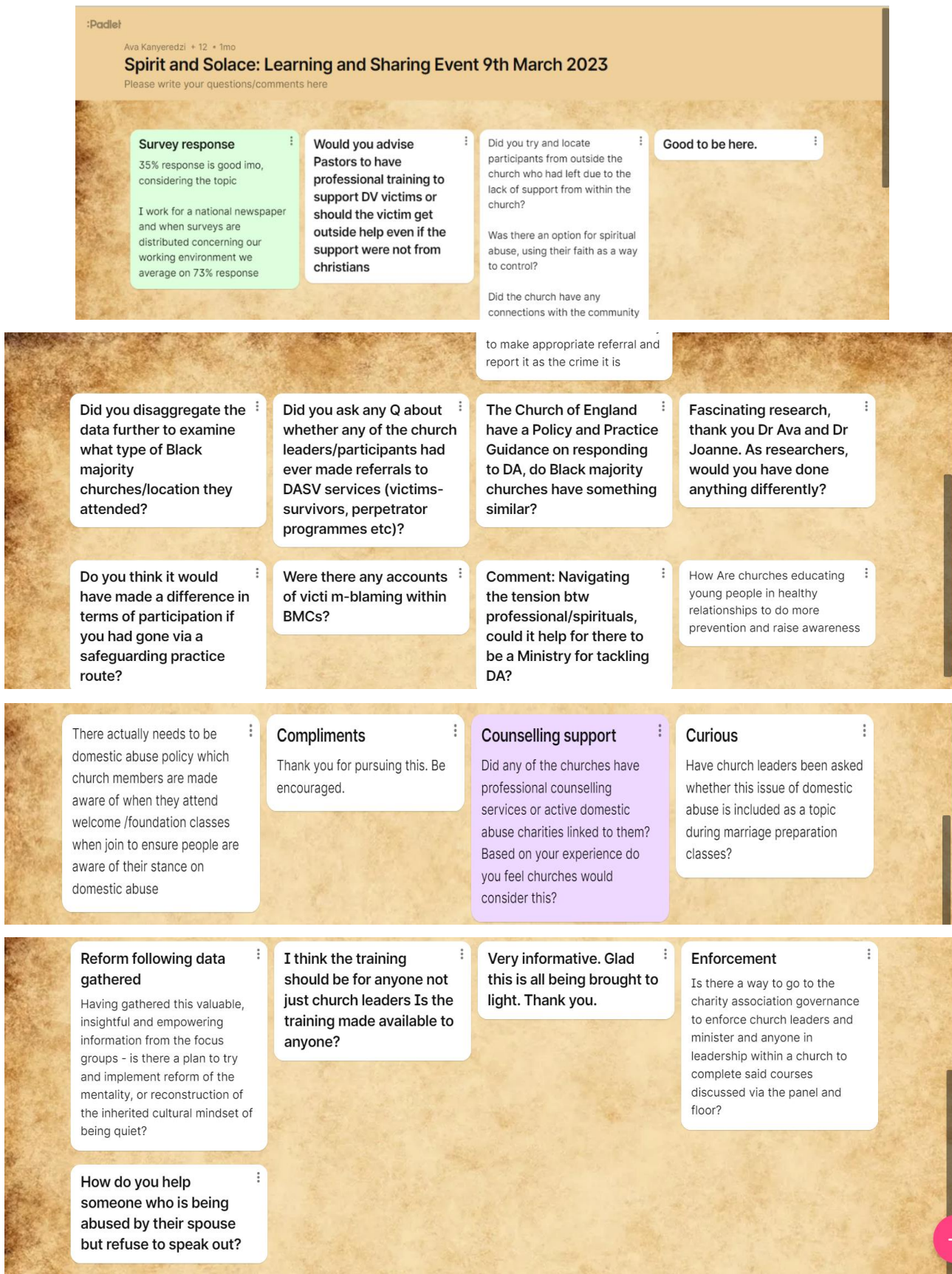


FIGURE 1: SPIRIT AND SOLACE DISSEMINATION EVENT PADLET COMMENTS/QUESTIONS

Survey Findings/Discussion

35 people participated in the research: 34 as survey respondents; three in a focus group and six in individual interviews. The sample was small, theoretically, and with caution, large enough to make generalisations to the wider BMC population, however, was somewhat homogenous.

Demographics

The majority of participants were female (84%), between the ages of 46-55 years old, and of Caribbean/Black British heritage, in employment and married (see Figure 2 below). The small sample was attributed to the gatekeeping and blocking by BMC clergy the RF earlier outlined in the Dissemination section. Raw data was collected in and exported from Jisc Online Surveys. Descriptive data were analysed both in MS Excel and SPSS 28.

Definitions of domestic abuse

Survey respondents were asked to share their own definitions of domestic abuse. Many of the definitions offered were like the UK government definitions of domestic abuse, with the exception that most respondents tended to restrict abusive behaviour to the home. Others focused on the forms of abuse. However, some alluded to the far-reaching impacts of domestic abuse, freedoms of the person and impacts for communities/humanity.

Forms of domestic abuse

These definitions tended to be like the UK government definitions of domestic abuse with focus on the forms.

“Any behaviour, attitude that is used to coerce or gain control of another and causes harm or distress physical, emotionally, psychologically.”

“A pattern of incidents of Emotional, Physical or Financial coercive control.

Control of an individual over another person be it financial, emotional physical.”

“It's physical abuse. Someone who lays their hands on you. Verbal abuse is the way they say you are not worthy to walk the streets, the way you, you're no use to anybody. Who's going to want you.”

“Domestic Abuse can include but is not limited to the following: Physical, Mental, Sexual, Financial or Economic.”

“Could be physical, financial, verbally. “

“Bullying and threatening behaviour including violence.”

“Incidents that include Sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse and mental abuse.”

Occurs within the home and relational, between partners/spouses

The following definitions were grounded in relationships between (ex)partners/spouses with some indicating that abuse occurs within the home.

“Physical and non-physical hostility that occurs in a family home where the perpetrators can be male or female.”

“Physically verbally, mentally and or emotionally hurt by a spouse/partner that you live with.”

“Violence towards a partner.”

“When a partner is violent or abusive.”

“Abuse from a partner. Taking away your freedom and choice. Making you feel unworthy of better. Physical or mental.”

“Domestic abuse occurs between people who have been in a romantic relationship.”

“Married or living with someone who is physically abusive.”

“When someone experiences abuse mainly in the home. This could be physical or mental abuse.”

“Physical, emotional, financial abuse taken place at home 🏠”

“Abuse within the home.”

“A culture of aggressive behaviour in the home circle.”

Relational, may or may not be in the home and includes relatives/siblings

The following definitions of domestic abuse took the wider relational approach to include close relatives.

“Domestic Abuse is any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse by a partner or family member. Violence and mental abuse at home. From spouse or parents even siblings.”

“We define domestic abuse as an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer.”

“Abuse within the household by any member of the family it is illegal. It takes many forms. Some people hide their bruises and cover-up for family members.

Physical, mental and financial abuse. Refused agency over your life by an individual or individuals in your family. “

“Behaviour within a relationship that is deemed abusive via physical, emotional, psychological and/or spiritual means.”

“Domestic abuse happens when at least one family member exerts power and control using a range of harmful and subtle violent tactic over others, particularly their spouses and children. The perpetrator can be a current or ex intimate partner.”

“Inappropriate behaviour inflicted by 1 or [more] persons onto another individual.”

Wider definitions indicating impacts and consequences

The following definitions took a moral and rights-based/legal tone and spoke to the wider impacts for a person’s sense of freedom and impacts on communities/humanity.

“It’s a crime against men and women.”

“An invasion of someone's rights.”

“This is one of the 5 terms of abuse. I think it has been hidden in many communities for decades and needs to wisely be tackled with support from all circles of society. Legitimate sentences and rehab for the offender and proper support for the victims.”

“Abuse from my understanding is a wicked and manipulative way to suppress an individual, keep them under human control or system against their belie[fs] for selfish reasons.”

“Manipulation and coercion within a close-knit community, usually unseen.” “May not be fully aware that this is occurring.”

“Destructive to the core of humanity.”

The definitions revealed survey respondents were knowledgeable and concerned about domestic abuse and had considered its importance and these influenced their participation in the current study. Some

of the wider definitions allude to the issue of domestic abuse being not yet sufficiently addressed in BMCs as they highlight the still hidden nature of domestic abuse in ‘close-knit’ or ‘some communities’.

Participants were experts in BMCs

All potential participants were screened by the by the question: *Do you attend or have you attended a church where most of the congregants are of African or Caribbean Heritage?* Only those who replied ‘yes’ could complete the survey. Out of the 34 survey participants, six were church leaders and most (68%) had attended weekly church services between nine and over 40 years.

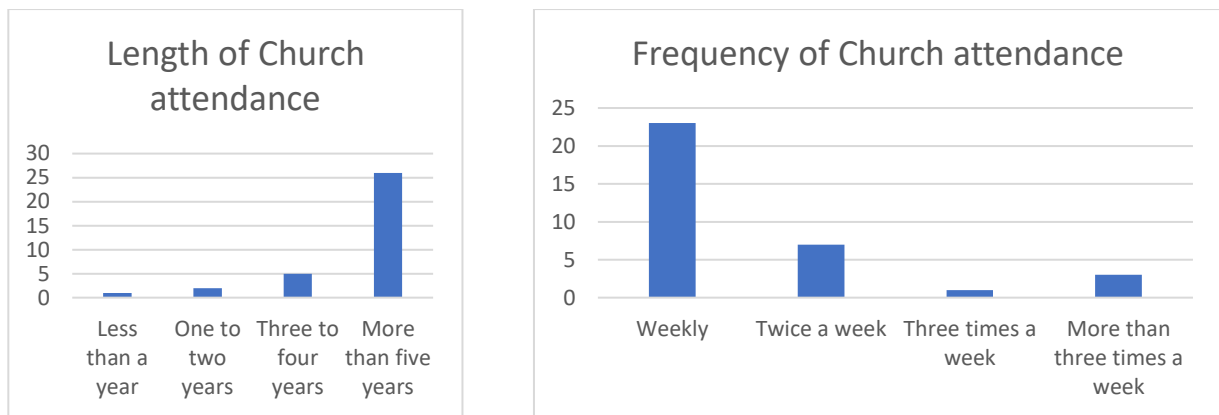


FIGURE 2: CHURCH ATTENDANCE

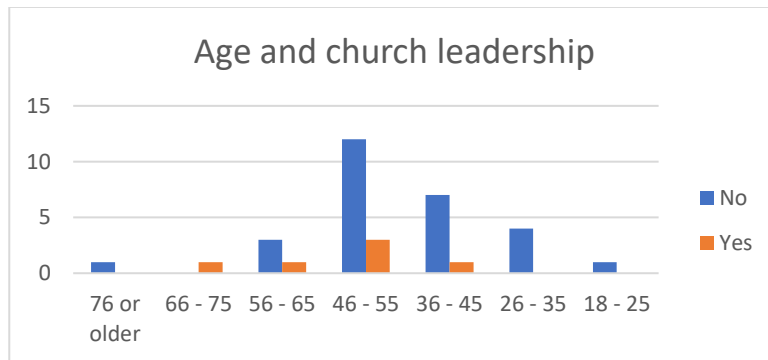


FIGURE 3: AGE AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Church leaders

All six church leaders had been leaders for more than five years and had supported or counselled churchgoers who had experienced domestic abuse and tended to be older in age.

Two had counselled three to five people per year and two, one to two people per year. Three had never referred a person to a refuge and, one at least twice and two at least once. Similarly, four church leaders had either never or rarely spoken about domestic abuse in sermons, while one covered domestic abuse once a year and the other once a month. One further added that congregants so invariably speak about experiences of domestic abuse

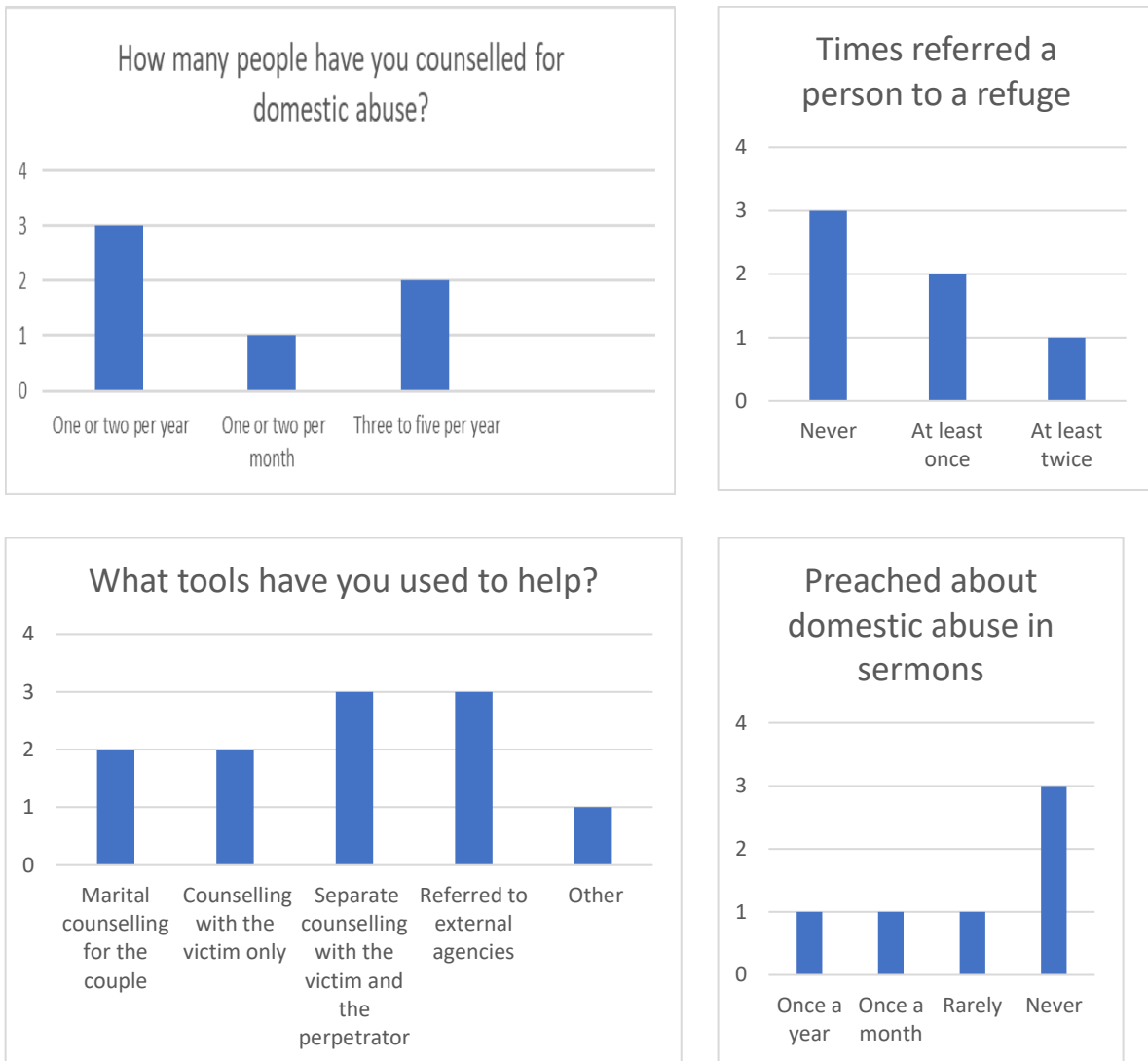


FIGURE 4: CHURCH LEADER DOMESTIC ABUSE INTERVENTIONS

Experience of domestic abuse

Both survey participants and individual interviewees disclosed previous experiences of domestic abuse. In the interviews some were first disclosures of sexual violence and mostly of physical and emotional domestic abuse. 13 (38%) out of the 34 survey respondents had experienced domestic abuse in the past, one in the previous year. This was slightly lower than Aunes and Barnes (2018) who found 42% of a much larger sample (n=438). There were two participants who had abused a partner in the past, both were younger in age. Survey participants who had experienced domestic abuse in the past were asked further details and their experiences of reporting and being supported in the aftermath. The most common forms of abuse experienced were emotional abuse, followed by physical abuse and coercive/controlling behaviour. Those reporting abuse tended to be younger.

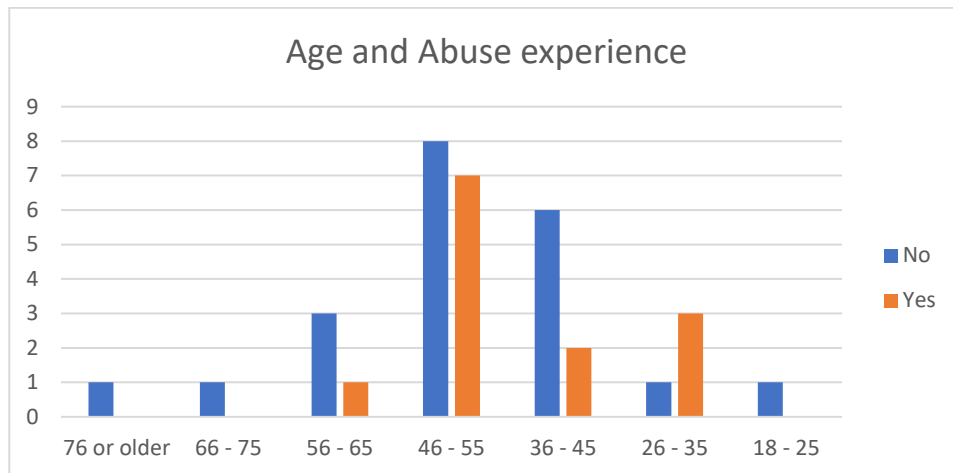


FIGURE 5: AGE AND DOMESTIC ABUSE EXPERIENCE

Survey respondents were also asked to select from a list of options who they told about experiences of abuse and the responses. In-keeping with previous research findings the most common recipients for first disclosures were close family and friends followed by the police (see Kanyeredzi, 2014). Survey respondents who disclosed to close family members/friends more commonly felt supported followed equally by feeling judged, told to contact the police or another option. A domestic abuse service, ‘no one’ and ‘other’ were the least selected options for disclosure. This confirms research on women’s fear of judgement from congregants (Abrahams et al., 2019; Damron and Johnson, 2015; Moore et al., 2015) and African American women’s decisions to not report abuse to church leaders for fear of an ineffective response (Williams & Jenkins, 2019; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009; Potter, 2007).

Survey respondents were also asked whether they told a fellow churchgoer or a church leader, their responses and whether the respondent would seek support in future from people within their church (see Figure 7 below).

Five people sought support from churchgoers. The most common response from churchgoers were judgement, but this was slightly less common than the rating for being supported by close family/friends. Two selected that they told a pastor. One was a positive response and the other a negative one somewhat supporting previous research. However most abuse experiences took place in the past, outside of church or before attending BMCs. Only two survey respondents selected that churchgoers were supportive after disclosing domestic abuse. There were in general more negative responses from churchgoers to work on marriage or told the respondent’s spouse. Out of the five who sought support from churchgoers, three would seek support in future and two would not.

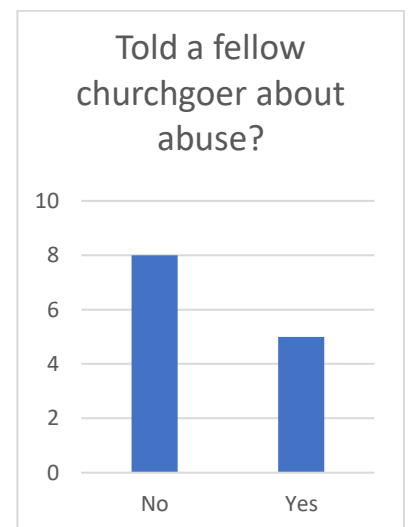
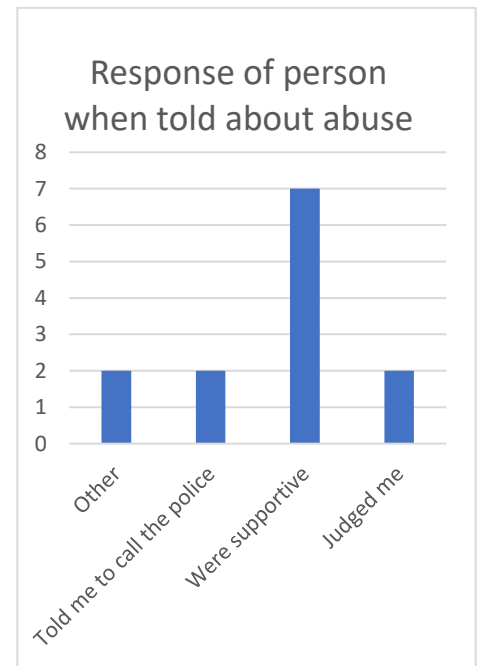
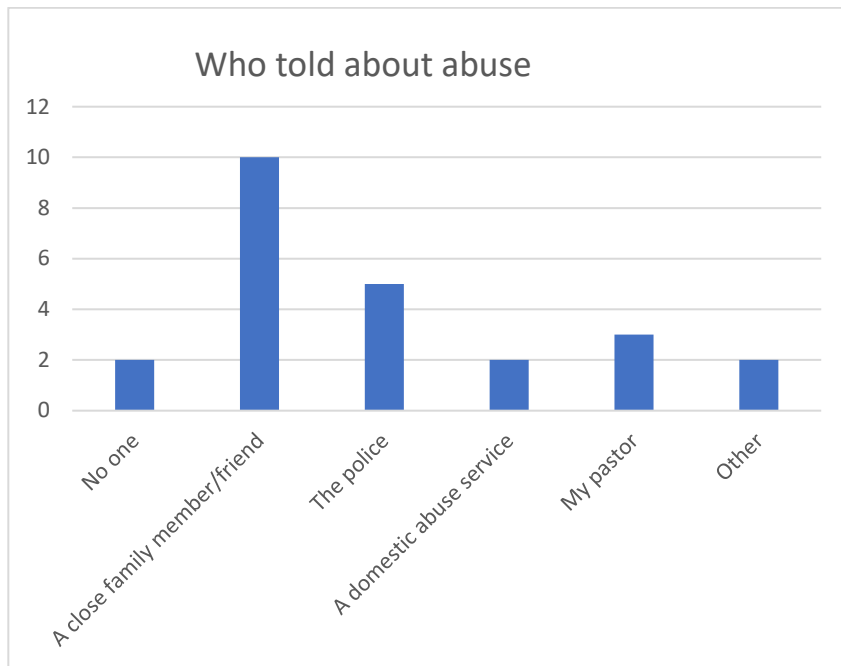


Figure 6: Domestic abuse victimisation and seeking support

Comfort in speaking to churchgoers and leaders about difficulties

Respondents were asked about how comfortable they felt speaking to church members about any difficulties and reported moderate comfort levels. 15 (45%) were very comfortable or comfortable in approaching fellow churchgoers for support, just under a third (29%) were somewhat comfortable and just

over a third (10-15%) were uncomfortable with approaching churchgoers/leaders for support. A Pearson's correlation test was carried out on the mean scores for comfort in speaking to churchgoers and comfort in speaking to church leaders/pastors. Comfort levels in speaking to pastors about difficulties were significantly correlated with comfort levels speaking to churchgoers about difficulties ($r=.61$, $n=34$, $p<.001$).

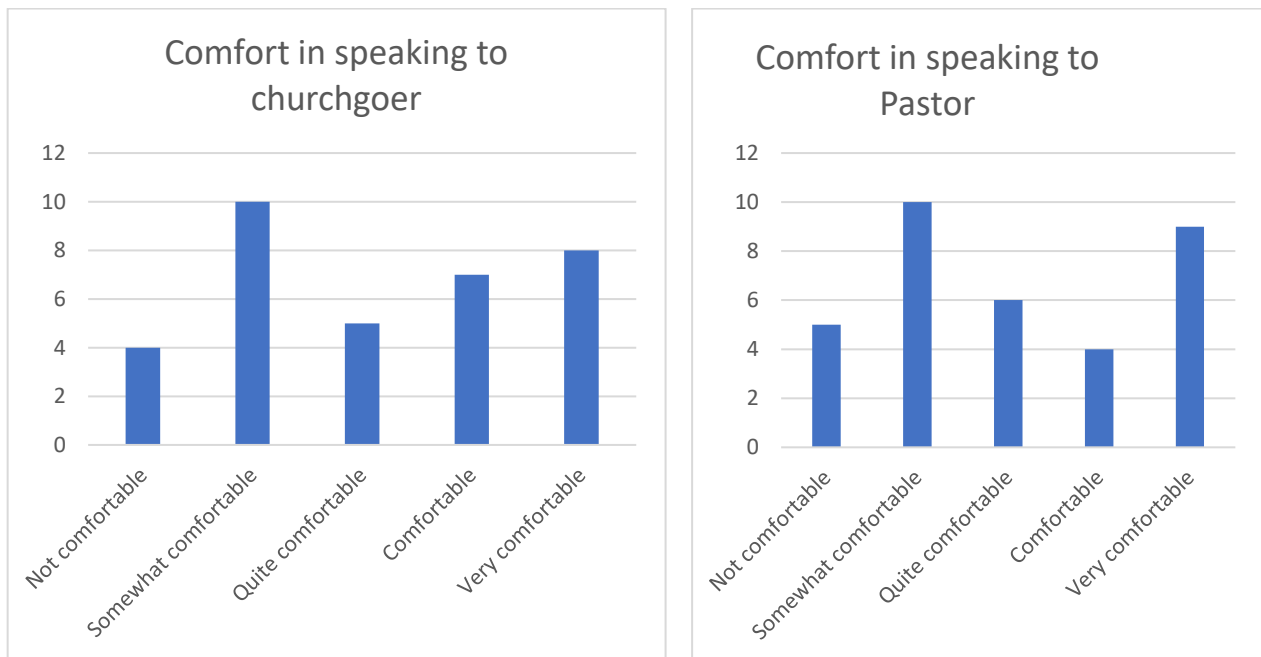


FIGURE 7: COMFORT IN SPEAKING TO CHURCHGOERS AND PASTORS/LEADERS

Additionally, respondents tended to be more comfortable in speaking about difficulties to churchgoers or pastors with age. This indicates, while some choose BMCs for support for difficulties they may be experiencing, they may not be best places for others.

Supporting fellow churchgoers

Out of the 28 churchgoers 12 (41%) had supported a fellow churchgoer reporting domestic abuse. Those who had supported fellow churchgoers also tended to be younger in age.

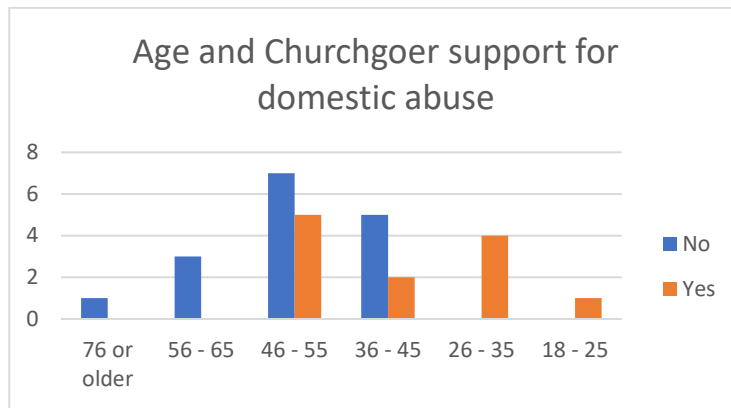


FIGURE 8: AGE AND CHURCHGOER SUPPORT

Most rated that they were supportive to peers reporting domestic abuse and told their pastors about the report, who advised confidentiality, two took over the support and three selected others, but there were no explanations offered.

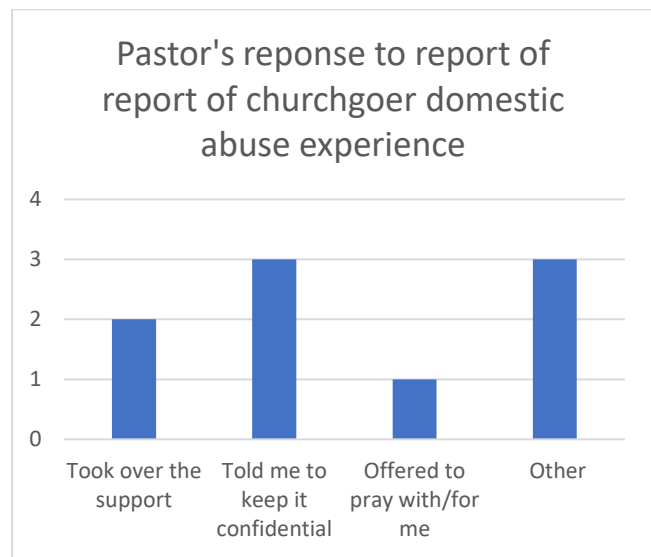
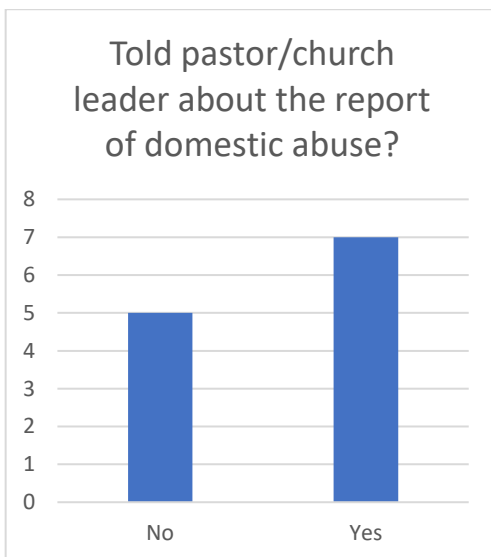


FIGURE 9: TELLING PASTORS/LEADERS ABOUT DOMESTIC ABUSE REPORTS

We also asked more specific questions about the presence of domestic abuse in sermons or ephemera in BMCs. Respondents reported that domestic abuse was either rarely or never discussed in sermons. Just under a third (29%) reported that in the BMCs they'd attended, they had witnessed services where pastors or guests spoke about domestic abuse and just over a fifth (21%) had seen posters about domestic abuse in BMCs, and paster rarely included lower that reported in (Aune and Barnes, 2018).

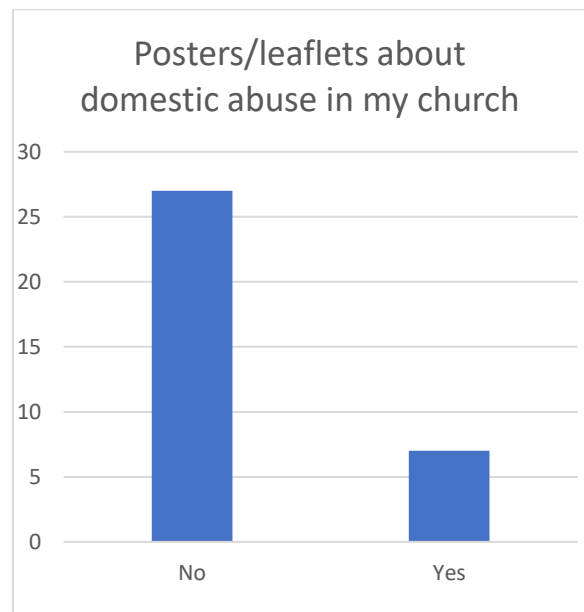
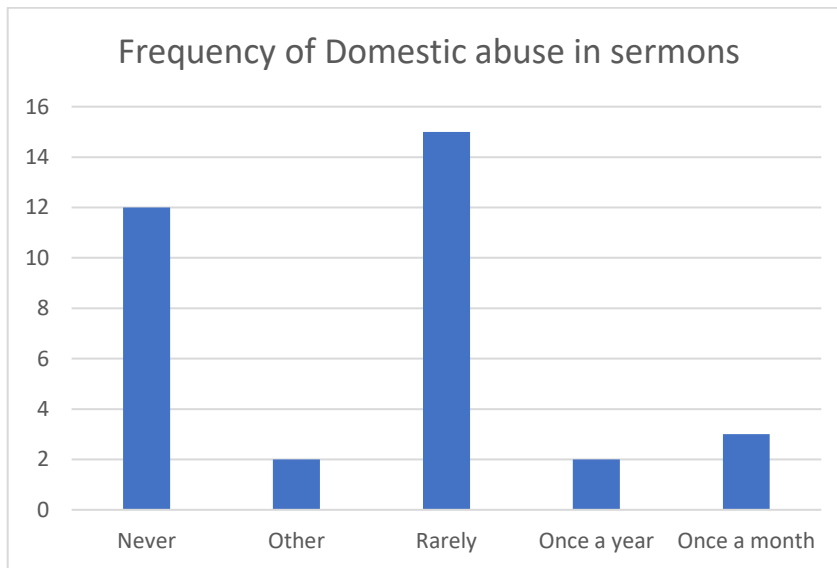


FIGURE 10: SERMONS/GUESTS, POSTERS/LEAFLETS ABOUT DOMESTIC ABUSE IN CHURCH

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed (94%) that domestic abuse should be addressed in churches. Arguably, opting to participate in this research reflects the need identified by respondents for churches to improve their responses to domestic abuse. However, the results also indicate that a more indirect response; in sermons, posters rather than methods such as reaching out to a fellow churchgoer might be preferable. It appeared that survey respondents were reflecting a desire for safe spaces in churches and acknowledging that churches were not yet as safe to disclose and address domestic abuse as they would like them to be.

Qualitative Findings/Discussion

Bar the definitions of domestic abuse, the qualitative responses from the survey were included in the reflexive thematic analysis carried out on the data that included six interviews with churchgoers, one focus group with three church leaders all were hand coded. Five main themes were identified from the qualitative data and each had a number of subthemes (see table below): *My spiritual uplift: attending BMCs, Domestic abuse is in church, pastor knows, congregation knows, BMC leadership and structures suppress action on domestic abuse, Churches worry more about their reputation/brand than domestic abuse, What churchgoers who are abused need from churches.*

TABLE 2: THEMATIC TABLE FOR QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

My spiritual uplift: attending BMCs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual release and replenish • Family (racial) togetherness/safety • Church is a hospital for the broken
Domestic abuse is in church, pastor knows, congregation knows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping domestic abuse secret in church • Black families, Black women and staying silent about abuse
BMC leadership and structures suppress action on domestic abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dichotomous leadership culture and domestic abuse • Preaching about domestic abuse in sermons • Safeguarding role in BMCs excludes adults • Churchgoers have a safe person • BMC congregants could volunteer more
Churches worry more about their reputation/brand than domestic abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pandemic and visibility of domestic abuse within BMCs • Concealing the abuser when he is a church leader • Worry about the church brand • Not in our church
What churchgoers who are abused need from churches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signpost support • Listen more to the person • Spiritual support and counselling

My spiritual uplift: attending BMCs

BMCs were well-loved by participants who wanted to promote their growth and development, especially in domestic abuse support. Attending church was described as fellowshipping with likeminded people, acceptance without judgement that removes daily stressors. Likened to visiting a spiritual spa where guests can feel safe, decompress, receive nourishment, experience family, togetherness and support from

pastoral teams, church leaders, and the main pastor. Three subthemes were identified within this theme: Spiritual release and replenish, Family (racial) togetherness/safety, and Church is a hospital for the broken.

Spiritual release and replenish

Attending church/BMCs fills the person with spiritual nourishment to face the secular/natural world. The secular/natural world binary was repeated both in the qualitative responses from the survey and focus group with church leaders. Church spaces were described a spiritually uplifting where attendees can be supernaturally moved by “the word” or sermon delivered by the pastor or “man of God” or where they can experience being “touched by God”. Attending church is both for individual instrumental reasons as well for a collective experience of worship as outlined by the extracts below:

“...when I come into church, I need to release some... I need to be fed myself, in a way.” (N, interview)

“It releases me from ... the everyday and you just want to go church. You know when you get that Sunday when you feel lifted and you meet all your family and friends at church. Especially when you don’t often see them... Lifted. Spiritually lifted ... you know what I mean. I just feel better for that day.” (P, interview)

“...going to church for me is a spiritual thing. You know, I go to church to serve, to give ... to be of help...And I also think and as I said before I also go to fellowship. But it is also a feel-good factor, because you know, we believe Pentecostal that when we go to church God is going to speak through the man of God. Even if it’s just one word, it might be just enough for what you need for that week. So, everyone in that room gets touched by God, in different ways.” (T, interview)

“God can move in such powerful ways. You can see signs and wonders; you can see miracles ...you see people’s lives touched. Yeah... so that’s the feeling I get when I go to church... yeah, it’s overwhelming.” (T, interview)

Such powerfully embodied supernatural and collective experiences explain the pull-factor for churchgoers attending BMCs. Given this special space of BMCs within minoritised communities, the topic of domestic abuse can appear antithetical to the experiences described above. However, participants alluded to the role of BMCs as racially normalising. This implies that some forms of abuse; racism or feelings of citizenship and belonging, can be knowingly achieved through attending BMCs.

Family (racial) togetherness/safety

Attending BMCs/church was likened to the best of family get-togethers. Not only are attendees surrounded by fellow Christian brothers and sisters, but attending normalises racial, and flattens

socioeconomic differences. Attendees can gain a sense of safety and familiarity, mutual support, among churchgoers from similar cultural backgrounds, also found in previous research on BMCs (Adedibu, 2013; Cappel, 2016). Feeling racially safe in BMCs enabled interviewees the freedom to “be yourself more”. The extracts below allude to the racialised pull-factors of BMCs for churchgoers.

“...you are in that space where you feel safe...with like-minded people I feel un-judged...I feel I can just... [exhales loudly] ...take a moment and breathe and just be recuperated you know... that’s how I feel about church! There’s very much a sense of you know...family, togetherness ...uhm...peace ... it doesn’t matter what your day’s been like, or your social economic or your racial, sexual ...it doesn’t matter.” (K, interview)

“...with the other churchgoers, it’s nice to see them. We are so overjoyed that we see each other. Because everybody as family, as one.” (P, interview)

In the above extracts K describes feeling “unjudged” in church almost as if this is the only space where they feel like this. Here the dichotomy of secular/natural is extended to inside/outside of the church. Inside there is safety, joy and the feeling of family in faith, painting the outside in contrast, as somewhat sinister and draining. Therefore, explaining what in the above subtheme the church/BMCs are described as places for attendees to be spiritually and in the current subtheme racially “fed”. The theme of family continues in the extracts below to encompass churchgoers’ spiritual, cultural and racial similarities implying humanising elements of attending BMCs for migrants in otherwise hostile, racist and othering UK communities.

“...when you are around your culture, there is nothing better than just being around your culture. You know that it is not just about knowing Christ, it’s if I need anything I can just go to my sister. Or we might know each other from the parish in Jamaica, or you know we’ve got family out there ... we can, not just serve God, but we can communicate.” (T, interview)

“Because everybody as family, as one.” (Survey respondent)

“...it’s probably the only place in the UK, whereby we are in the majority, where you know most places you’re not in the majority [smiles]. Erm... and I guess it’s just ... [3 sec pause] the freedom of being yourself.” (A, interview)

“You’re amongst your own more. When in day-to-day life, we are not; we are usually the minority. So, I suppose it’s nice being in the majority. Not that that, doesn’t bring its problems [laughs] but it erm...yeah so you are, you’re amongst your own and the freedom of your culture and who you are.

But as I said, having been in a Catholic church with the majority White, with some Black people in it, you know you do adapt yourself accordingly at the same time. Yes, but I think within a BMC, your ... it's more of a normal, a better fit." (C, interview)

The normalising advantage of "being with your own more" indicates "freedom of being yourself" can be forgotten when in White majority spaces. C is careful to clarify that their BMC attendance is not necessarily intentional, articulating their skill and comfort in adapting to spaces where they are minoritised. However, the freedom of attending a BMC where racialised people can be "in the majority" is a special feeling tied to such as space.

"...I think it is familiarity, its safety, its family, you know because the majority of the churches I've seen in the Caribbean, you'll have the Pastor, the Deacon is his cousin, the Worship leader is his daughter ... you know what I mean. It's all about family, safety, and trust. That's what you will find in a lot of these community churches. And equally, you know I will go to a Catholic church and it's the same principle there. The wife is the head of the Women's ministry, er...it's all about family. So, that...it's about safety." (T, interview)

"I guess they stuck together with their people even though, I would say my father had many friends that were Christians outside of our race. But in terms of church and community, it was ... you felt more trusted and safer in those environments because in those days Black people weren't allowed in White churches. But now twenty years later from that, dare I say I joined a church that was multi-cultural because it represented society for me." (T, interview)

T historicises BMC attendance by re-telling their origin narrative where they were established the UK in response to direct racist exclusion of Black churchgoers from attending White churches (see also Adedibu, 2013, Adu, 2015, Cappel, 2016). In most churches including BMCs, families are in leadership positions. Churchgoers in BMCs also share the racialised aspects of being migrant families with a collective history of racism. Participants also evidenced a change in the social landscape for feeling racially safe in churches. In contemporary times they feel freer to attend their church of choice, because society has changed. Below A and C engage with the ways in which BMCs can exploit the special place they hold in the lives of their racially minoritised churchgoers. The freedom that is a pull-factor for attending BMCs, can become overly familiar and cause conflict or churchgoers who may not be as accountable to peers as would be expected of them in more diverse settings.

"...how we are seen in the workplace, where often we are not in the majority so we, we ... because we have to sort of minimise certain bits of our culture to sort of get on with what we are doing.

When we are amongst our own, we are just ourselves which is great, but it can cause conflict at times.” (C, interview)

“...trained with a lot of White church people. So having seen both sides there’s good and bad in both. I think a huge problem with the Black churches, is we kind of key in on certain scriptures and take them out of context ... and some of that has to do with our culture and so that causes its own problems and it’s about unlearning and teaching properly.” (A, interview)

Culture can be exploited both by BMC congregants and leadership because of the special place and power BMCs hold in churchgoers’ lives within racist/racialised societies. This also means that BMCs should be facilitating discussions about links between forms of abuse including racism.

Church is a hospital for the broken

BMCs and churches more generally, are places for healing, where people from all walks of life can attend and unburden their brokenness. Church was likened to Alcoholics Anonymous which incidentally originated from a Christian church, Accident and Emergency or more generally, a hospital also found in previous research carried out in the UK (Aune and Barnes, 2018).

“...church is a hospital, so you get sick every now and again; spiritually sick.” (T, interview)

“...church is a holistic place that can support you with anything and everything. You know.... And I’ve got a friend who always compares church to A&E. you know... she says, “churches are A&E’s”. That’s what they are... they are A&E for people from whatever, you are, whomever you are, wherever you are going through, that is their role ...domestic violence is definitely part of the remit of what they do” (K, interview)

"I would liken it to, for example like AA...when you get into that space you are with people who are like minded." (K, interview)

"Yeah...And if you think about the churches' history... it was a place of refuge." (K, interview)

"Because I serve a whole God that is interested in all of me, so, if I’m suffering from any kind of abuse, he’s interested in helping me heal from that." (K, interview)

Despite their history of advocacy and solace and their role in communities as spaces for the “spiritually sick”, churches and BMCs are not yet sufficiently effective for domestic abuse support “sorry...we can’t do the rest of abuse, sorry...try down the road!” and they should be. In K’s extract it should follow that domestic abuse is part of the remit for all churches.

“...you’re dealing with a shameful situation, you’re dealing with a situation where people are in denial. You’re dealing with a situation where, it’s like abused people abuse people...you can’t just throw them out, you’ve got to help heal them. That’s what the churches job is to do. Because we all come in there broken. No one comes in the church perfect, not even the Pastor... and they will tell you of their past before.” (T, interview)

In the above extract T develops on the idea that churchgoers and pastors arrive to church “broken”, with histories of abuse. Here T refers to cycles of abuse whereby generations of a family are continuing abuse perpetration and victimisation (see Messman, Moore and Long, 2003), implying that when historic or current abuse such as domestic abuse is not addressed, churches are not fulfilling their role. The extract conveys disappointment that churches are “in denial” of their duty to support all who attend with whatever has caused their brokenness. Interestingly in the panel discussion at the dissemination event one of the panellists refuted this theme to argue, that churches are not hospitals. If churchgoers require support for domestic abuse, they should seek it from specialised services. Churchgoers and especially in BMCs, surrender too much of their agency to pastors, countering that anyone who has been spiritually anointed can start a church/BMC. Leading a church does not indicate pastors can sufficiently steer an institutional response to domestic abuse, and it is an erroneous expectation among especially BMC churchgoers, to assume that churches can heal social issues such as domestic abuse. Churches are solely for spiritual enlightenment. There was some disagreement both in the above extracts and in the audience. Furthermore, domestic abuse can contribute to a congregant’s broken-ness.

Domestic abuse is in church, pastor knows, congregation knows

Given the previous theme detailing how churchgoers including when they are pastors arrive to church in many cases broken by previous abuse experiences, domestic abuse can be likened to a screaming silence (Serrant-Green, 2011), one that everyone knows, yet rarely speak about (see Kanyeredzi, 2018) out of fear and among UK Black British people, painting communities in a negative light. Pastors are in many cases the first responders for churchgoers who are experiencing serious issues, domestic abuse being one of these (see Kanyeredzi, 2021). An even more hidden form of abuse is child sexual abuse that churchgoers will disclose to a trusted peer and refuse to disclose the abuser. There were specific and racialised challenges for BMCs. When domestic abuse became known in BMCs it was always second or third hand. In the example below there was a good outcome.

"I heard about the lady when she suffered from DV; she said that she was able to go to our leaders and you know they were able to help her through that...she is no longer with her husband; but they were able to help her through that." (K, interview)

There are two subthemes: *Keeping domestic abuse experiences secret in church, Black families, Black women and staying silent about abuse*, that explain why congregants in BMCs might suppress or conceal experiences. Pastors may also respond by keeping secret, knowledge of domestic abuse within their churches, further elaborated in the themes below.

Keeping domestic abuse secret in church

Churchgoers may stay silent or not seek support for abuse experiences for racialised, cultural and gendered reasons. In a society such as the UK where people are minoritised by race and ethnicity, cultural stereotypes circulate around Black families (Kanyeredzi, 2018) and no one wants to be a stereotype.

"Some churches want to know about it; some churches don't want to know about it. You get some churches that can be ignorant to it. They don't want to bring the problem there... "these things happen in churches... it's rampant in churches ... women or men coming into churches, coming off the streets because they look at the place that the girls are pure, the girls are holy ... and so, they, they target vulnerable ladies in the church or their children." (P, interview)

"...if they spoke out now ...no one would believe them. There was a lot of pressure on doing work together as a couple... you know trying to work through issues, trying to work through why the abuser was always being the way that he was ... you know you are in it together as a couple ... and you know sometimes we need to do this separate; so, you know there was a lack of understanding." (K, interview)

P interrogates the knowledge claims of pastors who are portrayed as intentional at keeping domestic abuse reports secret. Added to this are people who specifically attend churches with the knowledge that there will be women and girls or potential victims, that they can target for abuse. This again builds on the finding above of churches being hospitals for the broken including those who are preparators and victims/survivors of domestic abuse. However, P indicates that while some churches wish to address domestic abuse, others do not, either out of ignorance or negligence. Conversely K describes how their church effected a dangerous response when working with a couple where the husband was also abusing his wife. Counselling couples with the aim of keeping marriages together and either minimising or failing to understand the risk of harm to the person being abused by their spouse, has been reported in research on church responses to domestic abuse, including BMCs (Baird & Gleeson, 2018; Bent-Goodley and Brade Stennis, 2015; Gillum, 2009; Nason-Clark, 2015; Richard, 2017).

Black families, Black women and staying silent about abuse

A common theme in research with African and Caribbean heritage women in the UK and African American women on violence/abuse, is that they respond by staying silent (see Kanyeredzi, 2018). These responses are learned directly or indirectly (Wyatt, 1992) through observing how elder female relatives manage with domestic and sexual abuse (Wilson, J., 2016) or they are silenced by threats from the perpetrator or family members who do not want to bring shame to the family by telling their “business” to people outside of the home/community (Kanyeredzi, 2018; Wilson, M., 1993)

“...during slavery you know the barbaric abuse, the sexual, the physical ... the kind of abuse that they went through and if you think about generations that have come on; we’ve all shutdown, shutdown, shutdown, so that we are just like a clam shell ...and we just don’t talk about it. We just don’t say anything about it. We took it in, and we hope it all just goes away.” (K, interview)

“...some Black families, Black women have been taught that, you know, you’ve got abused by your dad, and say, “oh it’s alright”, because my dad did the same to me ...And then I come along as her church friend, and say, “oh you know what... I’ve been abused by my dad” and they say ... “oh you know what it’s alright” and just leave it!” (P, interview)

“I know women who have gone through a physical abuse, sexual abuse in their families and they don’t talk about it... it’s not, it’s not given life! Does that make sense? It’s not given that... that energy, that anything to discuss it ... I think for us Black women we tend to turn into ourselves. So, not only are you the victim, you also become, the perpetrator ...you put yourself in his shoes...does that make sense?” (K, interview)

Black women’s responses to domestic abuse is to stay silent and this silence appears to be normalised in BMCs experienced by P. The silence is a coping strategy and bears similarity to the strong Black woman persona that African American and African and Caribbean heritage women in the UK, willfully or in P’s extract above, are being encouraged to adopt to manage past abuse experiences. Not giving “life” to their experiences of domestic and child sexual abuse results in Black women “turning in on” themselves and becoming their own perpetrator. This embodied description also predicts mental distress as an inevitable consequence unless “that energy” is given to speaking about abuse experiences and speaking within BMCs.

Relatedly staying silent about abuse experiences is also a strategy to protect Black men who are over-surveilled and experience harsher criminal justice outcomes. Connected to this are cultural stereotypes about Black men who abandon their families giving rise to the ‘Black single mother’. To avoid becoming

another statistic, and to maintain respectability, Black women may also continue in relationships/marriages where their spouses/partners are violent.

“He’s a good stepfather or he ...Dad you know. He’s a good dad to his own children, he’s a good dad to her children ...he’s a this, he’s a that...he’s a great role model ...you know, la, la, la, la, la, la! But he’s an abuser. You know you will hear women say, ‘he’s a great dad, he’s this, he’s that’ but he’s an abuser!” (K, interview)

The default to defend Black men even when they are their abusers (Richard, 2017) is evident in the above extract, where domestic abuse is defensible because their partner is not only a good father/father figure but a role model for Black fatherhood and especially in BMC communities. BMCs should connect forms of racist abuse with silence about domestic abuse that can be present in congregations especially among Black women congregants.

BMC leadership and structures suppress action on domestic abuse

Survey respondents and interviewees argued that it was the responsibility, both spiritually and practically of church leaders to manage and lead on domestic abuse. When church leaders addressed domestic abuse in sermons more congregants came forward for support (see Isstratii and Ali, 2023). The power of church leaders to affect change and to exploit this very power to conceal abusers and blame victims/survivors, was also a theme.

“Well, it’s up to the ministers, the church leaders to see if they want to bring that [domestic abuse] to the church. To the congregation and the church, so it would be up to them.” (P, interview)

“The church is a powerful institution where most believers value the voices of the leaders. The pulpit ha[s] been used to intimidate, harass, enable, justify abuse while perpetrators have been empowered and victims blamed and condemned. When the congregation is aware the leaders are not enablers, victims and potential victims will be reassured the church is a safe place, perpetrators will be aware the church is not a place to hide and possibly seek help.” (Survey respondent)

“...it is about them as individuals realising that actually, we are doing an injustice to our communities that we are looking after and God will hold you accountable...So well actually you didn’t teach my children about this, so my daughter was suffering in silence and didn’t think that she had anywhere to go. He’s been suffering with a wife in silence and didn’t think that they had anywhere to go, because you failed to say it. You failed to say actually, it’s something that we should talk about.” (T, focus group)

Churches and BMCs have the power to protect, and leaders can choose to exploit and intimidate their congregants, mimicking the very tactics used to perpetrate domestic abuse. Leading by example, is pivotal for churchgoers to have confidence that their disclosures of domestic abuse will be safely responded to. Participants also appealed to church leaders' own faith and empathy by challenging them on their likely failure on 'Judgement Day' when asked by God to account for their negligence on violence and abuse. This also illustrates how T is using her faith and drawing from Biblical scriptures to denounce domestic poor clergy responses (Damron and Johnson, 2015; Shaikh, 2007). However, while church leaders have power over their congregants, there are limitations to their power. Nonetheless, they do still have the responsibility to respond to reports of domestic abuse, even if only to signpost congregants.

"...churches aren't local authority. They're not. But they are a community support, so they have a responsibility to see, report, signpost. Are they the right places that can do the direct work with the perpetrator? Maybe not. Because it's a skillset. But creating safe spaces for both...maybe to get healing and freedom and advice, then definitely, yeah." (N, interview)

In the extract above, the responsibility of churches is a practical one. While churches are not expected to have the specialism to manage the complete victim/survivor or perpetrator journey with domestic abuse, they can at least signpost. Elsewhere in T's transcript concludes: "There are just somethings churches cannot do". Churches are accountable not only to God but to the "law of the land" and the communities where they deliver services. Therefore, it is the responsibility both spiritually and practically, of church leaders to manage and lead on domestic abuse.

Throughout the qualitative data, participants described BMC leadership styles using binary couplets: *Old Testament/New Testament, Little/Big, Independent/Umbrella, Windrush/Post-Windrush*, to describe the culture and leadership styles within BMCs. This designation predicted how a BMC might respond to reports of domestic abuse.

Old style leadership

The 'old style leadership' of Old Testament, Little, Independent and Windrush BMCs is controlling, dictatorial with some leaders requiring "blind loyalty".

"I hear from people who have been in old Black churches, and they are very old Christian values and ways they get upset with new, the New Testament. They just want to live in the Old Testament, they look down upon you. When pastor would talk about the past, you never hear another church talk about their past. It's always to do with the people in the Bible, they will be preaching, preaching but you won't hear them talking about themselves." (P, interview)

“...it’s [Windrush style BMC] like a culture of conformity...I would say some is spoken, some is unspoken. The culture to not criticise leadership of the church.” (A, focus group)

Old style leadership is described in the extracts above as depersonalised sermons, that congregants find difficult relate to. When pastors leave their personal story out of sermons, it distances them from the congregants making it easier for pastors to judge or ‘look down on upon you’. This style of leadership and worship can also serve to exclude the real and present issue of domestic abuse in churches. The extracts below indicate the consequences of such dictatorial rule, where there is no governing body or accountability. Efforts to conceal the true nature and motive of the leadership style are also missed by junior leaders and congregants.

“This independent thing. I am not saying that there aren’t. They are probably other great independent churches out there, but in our personal experience. We were like no, we need to go to something that is part of a body and accountability...[T]he congregation, the ministry leads are not fully aware of the true culture of the churches they are in; only the leaders know.” (C, focus group)

“I hear my African colleagues say “Pastor is like a God”. It’s almost like too much authority and I’ve seen in two different Pentecostal, two different BMCs whereby, even though there is a council of some kind, there’s supposed to be checks and balances, for the senior leader, it’s a bit of a sham, it doesn’t really work.” (A, focus group)

Old style BMC leadership is controlling, depersonalises faith to conceal the humanness of the congregation and issues such as domestic abuse. From the extract above, some congregants are clearly aware of the styles of leadership. However, despite this knowledge there is still no governing body, no accountability for old style leadership. A lack of governance and accountability in old style leadership permits, excuses and turns a blind eye to domestic abuse from fellow leaders. This then sets the foundation for poor responses and frustrates the efforts of leaders who wish to assist victims/survivors (Davis and Johnson, 2021; Nevhutanda, 2019; Shaw et al., 2022; Williams and Jenkins, 2019).

It follows that the expectation in churches with old style leadership, is that women abused by their spouses who are pastors/church leaders, will not speak about it. They therefore facilitate a coverup of cases.

“...they are part of the Windrush generation, so there is that whole aspect of how they came over and how women and wives were treated”...The Windrush generation ...helped to build the church...so a lot of those deep-rooted beliefs are there, that okay if your husband is battering you, you just put up and shut up, because that’s what we did. You are not strong enough, you know just

get on and pray to the Lord. Yes, we must, but we have to do in the spiritual and in the natural...Not just pray and hope it all goes away, we do both," (C, focus group)

Domestic abuse responses in churches with old style leadership encourage a strong Black woman persona (Kanyeredzi, 2018) who can 'just get on and pray to the Lord' on her own and without support from churches or specialised agencies. This also connects to the reasons outlined earlier, why Black women churchgoers may stay silent about abuse, or disclose but wish for the hearer to keep their disclosures secret, evidencing some internalisation of cultural mandates (Chisale, 2018). The dilemma of how to negotiate what is occurring spiritually for the victim/survivor and how they can be helped by agencies independent to the church, is captured in phrase 'we have to do in the spiritual and in the natural.' Churchgoers who experience domestic abuse require specialised spiritual or faith support within their domestic abuse support (Abrahams et al., 2019). The complex negotiations between being silenced and ineffective church responses to domestic abuse further explain the intense blocking and gatekeeping experienced during the data collection, whereby the invitation to participate can be seen by BMC leaders as evoking difficult or seemingly unsolvable and exposing issues.

Old style leadership do provide support to women such as assistance with rehousing, if their spouses/partners are outside of the church. In other cases where church leaders were sexually exploitative, they would conduct a form of public shaming and acknowledgement of wrongdoing by placing the men on the "back seat/back row" of the church for a period. On the back seat/row leaders who had been abusive could reflect and learn and at a later point resume their roles. In cases where child sexual exploitation/abuse, leaders would be swiftly removed and barred from the church. The sticking point here would be in cases of domestic abuse when the abuser was also a church leader. In one reported case, the back seat/row was utilised for a short period, before fellow church leaders and some congregants opposed and the person was permanently removed from their duties. An approach similar to those reported in Richard (2017).

New style leadership

New Testament, Umbrella, Big and Post-Windrush: new style churches, were described as more diverse; with not only Caribbean or African congregants, and often with leadership with social service professional backgrounds, who could provide good support for domestic abuse and mostly managed these via in-house counsellors.

"...big churches are really good... because they are on it. They see a need; they provide a service for it. Where you've got smaller churches, you don't have as much volunteers, you don't have as many ministry teams, it's harder to put things in place. So, where do those people go?" (N, interview)

Above, new style churches are also described as larger with expansive hierarchies of volunteers who can effectively respond to domestic abuse.

"I have a really good associate pastor to turn to and his wife, they a really good and they too try to strike that balance ... If maybe the lady has come to me and said this is what is going on with my life...and she's made a point: 'Look, I don't really want you to say anything,' then I can still discuss it without telling them, oh it was [says name] who told me these things. What do you think I should do? How do you think I can support her? And I know for them it will be: Get on your knees and pray [laughs], because obviously she [the victim/survivor] doesn't want to do anything and I know the associate pastor's wife for example, she would ask as well "What does she wanna do?" (T, focus group)

Not only are new style churches larger, but they also have more specialised leaders who can effectively respond or support victim/survivors of domestic abuse. Above is a description of a typical BMC churchgoer disclosure of domestic abuse, where they want the hearer to stay silent. However, the church leader's response is to defer to the victim/survivor's decisions and not act on their behalf. In the survey qualitative data, acting on the victim's behalf was a common response that was identified in answers to what respondents would do differently if a churchgoer approached them for help with domestic abuse.

The distinction between old and new style leadership was a key indicator of BMC responses to domestic abuse where churches with new style leadership were found to be more supportive. However old and new did not reflect the ages of the leaders; churches lead by younger pastors and whose positions might have been handed down from parents, could continue to lead using the old style. A leadership review/culture change regarding domestic abuse is required both in old and new-style BMCs because aspects of both can prevent identification of domestic abuse as racially relevant and (in)directly conceal abuse and abusers. Not wanting to identify with domestic abuse also meant opting out of the current study.

Safeguarding role in BMCs excludes adults

There is insufficient training for church volunteers and the safeguarding role a recommended one for churches in England. Participants reported safeguarding as a perfunctory role in their experience of BMCs or limited only to the protection of children. Participants identified a myriad of issues with safeguarding in BMCs: it's limited scope and minimal inclusion of domestic abuse and the general lack of safeguarding training for church volunteers. Given the size of some BMCs this warrants consideration for the complex ways that attending church could present people who perpetrate abuse, access to potential targets for victimisation.

“Vast amounts of people coming in a central location with a problem with domestic abuse within the church, yet no one’s had formal training.” (C, focus group)

“...we get safeguarding training and most of our safeguarding training is actually for people working in the church...So, church workers...so safeguarding training is focused... there’s a bit on domestic abuse but most of it focuses on the children. So, if we had a whole seminar for example on domestic violence on abuse in general.” (K, interview).

“Right, that’s one thing that they don’t really talk about is DV. So where it’s spoken about generally, because you get the sheet, you do the course... but when it comes to the church itself, that’s one thing that’s not really highlighted.” (T, interview)

“The thing is that it is making sure that everyone who is in a volunteer role understands that too... That has the training, that knows the safeguarding and uhm, knows how to respond, you know because that is what I’m feeling; that not everyone knows how to respond, or who to reach out to.” (N, interview)

N above furthered in their interview, even when trained, there can be confusion among volunteers as to what information can be shared with outside agencies. All obfuscate routes to support and makes BMCs with inadequate safeguarding procedures unsafe for victims/survivors of domestic abuse.

“I think just understanding that it [domestic abuse] actually happens and not be shocked! By it...it’s bad and it shouldn’t be happening, but I think if we can get over, ‘it could never be happening; oh my God it shouldn’t be happening’ and then move past and be like, ‘okay, well then what are we going to do about it?’ You know that actually, it happens...you know we need to respond to that.” (N, interview)

Disbelief that domestic abuse can be occurring in church among BMC volunteers and leaders could be a numbing experience resulting in a reluctance to address the issue, stunting an effective response. A review of the safeguarding roles and responsibilities is required in BMCs where safeguarding only has as remit child protection.

Churchgoers have a safe person

Even when there is a named person, a skilled counselling professional that can offer support, churchgoers tend to turn to their own ‘safe person’ to whom they disclose issues/concerns, usually this is the “top man” or senior church leaders. Often the safeguarding lead is the last to learn about safeguarding decisions, including domestic abuse. There was a long discussion in the focus group about the process of

seeking support for domestic abuse for churchgoers. Most disclosures would go to the main or senior pastors. This was also evident in the survey, where respondents were comfortable to approach their pastor with a personal issue/concern. However, in the interviews, churchgoers disclosed to whomever they felt was their safe person or with whom they had a relationship.

"I think it is also because that's the pastor and when people have a problem, they obviously want to go to the top." (C, focus group)

"I am the safeguarding lead and ninety-nine point nine, nine, nine percent of the time I wouldn't have heard nothing. It would have gone to another pastor." (T, interview)

"...we have a person that deals with that. She's a counsellor in her fulltime position and a social worker. So we have that person, but then people never go to her." (T, focus group)

Building trusting relationships with a key person enable BMC churchgoers to feel safe when disclosing domestic abuse and other confidential issues. Building close relationships is also connected to the theme of subtheme of Family/Racial togetherness earlier outlined, as a pull factor for BMC church attendance. Given that some leaders may also be abusive, participants suggested wider safeguarding training and that the church alone is insufficient to respond to domestic abuse.

"...it is about the relationship that people have. Especially in churches, it's about where [who?] do I feel comfortable with? My only thing with churches is that, if it's the senior leader, our top minister, that was your abuser? Where do you go?: You would have to go out[side] of the church and point fingers upwards and say it happened there, because for a lot of us it's about relationships." (T, focus group)

"...family support workers are a wealth of knowledge. You know they are just like GP's, they have expertise in all different parts of families lives, whether that's in addition, prison, child protection or adult safeguarding or you know relationship building, boundaryship [sic] building, building boundaries, parenting. All of this... one person has all this knowledge." (N, interview)

Having a named person in the church who churchgoers can approach for advice and for safeguarding disclosures, was also a suggestion. Holding disclosures of what can be complex and difficult issues of abuse, also places an emotional burden onto the hearer/safe person. A family support worker with links to support agencies could assist pastors/safe persons in relieving some of the emotional burdens especially in smaller churches.

“That takes the pressure off the pastor, it takes the pressure off the ministerial team, but it also, allows the community congregation to have someone to go to; the go-to person who has been building links in the community, and knows exactly what is going on in that borough.” (N, interview)

“And it’s just important for churches to create safe spaces because sometimes, someone doesn’t want to leave... doesn’t know how to leave or know what she can do. But it is ... you know trying to build those safe communities within the church you know the small groups, an allowing places where women can easily talk safely. Because sometimes, that all you can do.” (N, interview)

“It’s not even about a private space but finding safe spaces for people to do that with. And sometimes your safe people are family members and sometimes your hurt is from them, and people connected to them so they can’t share...you know and then they have buried it for so long ...what’s the point in talking about it now?” (N, interview)

The complexities of churchgoers, who are unsure of how to manage or support the person, holding accounts/disclosures of domestic abuse, are captured in the above extracts. This was also a theme in the survey responses and further discussed below. Safe persons could also be family members who have also been or are being abused and their advice may run counter to principles of safeguarding practice. The safeguarding role in BMCs is therefore key in the response to domestic abuse and when fully developed, could steer the direction of the whole church towards better support for victims/survivors.

BMC congregants could volunteer more in church

There are also aspects of BMC congregations that might prevent effective management of domestic abuse. While many BMC congregants are lawyers, teachers, doctors, nurses and other skilled professionals, they leave their professional roles behind when they attend church and could volunteer more.

“...lawyers, people, professionals, they’ve come in and they leave it [their professionalism at the door, and it really, really shocked me.” (C, focus group)

“Ours is very much, people want to put their hat down. You have to say, ah, are you not a lawyer? What do you do? I’m forever going, what do you do? What do you do? Oh that’s interesting. They literally, they come to the door, they’re like right that’s it my lawyer hat’s down, my social worker hat’s down, my doctor’s hat’s down.” (T, focus group)

“...I have come to church for myself, for my growth, my spiritual growth and I really don’t want to be doing the work that I am doing in the world. I just want to come here and be, sit back and relax.” (T, focus group)

“People will spiritualise it and say well actually, well God is not calling me into becoming a first aider, but you are a nurse, no?” (T, focus group)

The extracts above bear some relation to the reasons why people attend churches and BMCs more specifically. The earlier theme of attending church for spiritual uplift explains why churchgoers may want to do volunteer work that is different from their day jobs. In church they wish to work on their spiritual selves, not through giving but through reflection and learning, to fill up in order to manage better with their secular lives. Violence work (Kelly, 2007) is difficult and in BMCs the violence work is also racialised and forms of racialised violence and abuse are burdensome (Kanyeredzi, 2018). In the extracts above, the reasons provided by churchgoers as to why they leave their professional hats at the door, is that it is burdensome both replenish and do the labour of volunteering. Given that all including those who are victim/survivors of domestic abuse may be coming to church to unburden, they question of who does this work hangs uncomfortably in the extracts. ‘Spritualising’ the reasons for not using their social work, legal and professional skills within church spaces, presents a challenge for a BMC response to domestic abuse. Below are two alternative explanations for apparent BMC churchgoer hesitancy to volunteer.

“You can separate their job to their church but even if you are working in a secular organisation, you can be working for social services, but when you are in church you are not working for social services, because you are in church and you’re a volunteer and so, the way you would deal with things is going to be slightly different than in your professional role you know... so, it’s almost like... and if you are in a church that is in a different borough from where you work, the borough works slightly different.” (N, interview)

“I think many individual Christians are prepared to bring their professionalism into the church, but in some churches, it is not accepted.” (A, focus group)

“...there are so many professionals in different spheres of life, but unless, to be honest in our specific church, you are loyal, they are not gonna use you. And loyalty is expected, blind loyalty. You have to be loyal to the church, to the people, but it shouldn’t be blind and therefore, it’s not a case that they just use you in positions because they think whatever happens, you are loyal to them. You are loyal to God.” (A, focus group)

“...you should be able to bring that professionalism into the church and use your skills and gifting that you have been given in the house of God, erm but in some churches, it is almost like they reject it, for various reasons. For mostly, one of the reasons I think is control, because the more you have

people educated in certain ways and coming in into nucleus and doing things, it can also expose what's wrong. What's being done wrong there, which isn't always a bad thing." (C, focus group)

For BMC churchgoers to volunteer their secular skills within church, leaders need to be accepting of their skills and decision-making. Here again the secular/natural versus the spiritual roles were compared (see Cappel, 2016 on bulimic responses) where church roles differ to professional roles. Some of the barriers could be practical; social work professionals go to churches in different locations to their practice and are not able to signpost external support agencies. Elsewhere in their interview N suggests family support workers in BMCs could assist here. Another barrier could be that the offer of volunteering is not accepted by the BMC with old-style leaders, because they wish to maintain control and be unchallenged, where suggestions are perceived as challenges and threats to their leadership and are not well received. This loyalty could also extend to concealing abuse because it hurts the church brand, further outlined in the theme below.

For other BMCs it could be as simple as reminding churchgoers from the pulpit of their roles as Christians to serve.

"And also from the pulpit, it is also reminding, yes some people are there to be pillars, but most of us are there and we're supposed to serve." (C, focus group)

Participants across the data had experienced good examples of domestic abuse responses. However, these tended to be in larger churches or churches with new style leadership. Volunteering in BMCs is therefore contingent on churchgoers' reasons for attendance, whether they can be convinced to also apply their professional skills to the church's domestic abuse response, and the acceptance of senior leaders to be directed by those considered to be their flock.

Churches worry more about their reputation/brand than domestic abuse

How BMCs manage reports of domestic abuse is dependent not only on their style of leadership but their reputation/brand within communities. Trying to maintain a clean image of Christianity, Black families in a context where there have been cases of abuse in BMCs and the wider social landscape of institutional abuse in Catholic churches, influence church leaders to want to distance their churches from abuse. This can extend to protecting leaders who are also abusers, because having a leader who is also an abuser, signals failure or ineptitude as leaders in electing fellow leaders who fall far from expectations. All might result in losing congregants. Additionally, the fragile reputation of leaders of minoritised groups, where they are attempting to avoid tarnishing BMC churches with negative or bad incidents. Churches and BMCs are also businesses who wish to keep and expand their membership. A range of unhelpful and dangerous responses to domestic abuse can result.

“Because if you have been brought up a certain way in church which is predominantly Black; you can get some, like I say some very ignorant Christian, like I say, very ignorant Christians. Obviously, they don’t want to bring trouble to the church. ...[I]n a more divers[e] church where there is a yes, we are there to support we are there to listen.” (P, interview)

“...for a lot of people, the church is their sanctuary. It is the first place. The first place they run to you know. I have got no food in my house. I am not gonna pick up the phone and phone say the social worker. I’m gonna phone the church. You know erm, my son’s giving me trouble, I’ll phone the church. I’m a bit lost as to how to navigate my housing, oh, let me phone the church. So it’s there for all those other things, so why should it not be there when it comes to DV. Why should it not be a place that people say, for me again it goes back to the fact that our leaders are not competent. They are frightened...it’s taboo.” (K, interview)

“Because it is happening and the church are aware and ignoring it and trying to deal with it themselves.” (Survey respondent)

Domestic abuse in churches with old style leadership can be viewed as an issue that would ‘bring trouble’ or undue public attention to the church, therefore leaders either try to conceal it, ignore it or ‘deal with it themselves’, all ineffective responses. This is surprising given old and new style BMCs are still the first whom members turn to when in difficulty. A lack of strategic leadership is at fault for not extending the safety congregants feel in approaching pastors for every other difficulty. The rationale for such a response is also to protect the reputation or brand of the church. Publicly acknowledging that a BMC has domestic abuse cases, could harm its brand.

“I think that there [are] pride issues. There [are] reputational issues... looking at it from a business point of view, if you’re then seen to be not good at what you are doing...you can’t let it out. You ...keep it schtum because outsiders will say: ‘I don’t want to go to this church, because they’ve got issues’!...so therefore, you’ve gotta keep hold of it and keep it hush-hush.” (A, focus group)

A lack of transparency in acknowledging domestic abuse is within church, can also mean exploiting faith to “numb” junior leaders into accepting what is clearly the wrong response to domestic abuse. Leaders “spiritualise or substitute the direct naming of domestic abuse with words such ‘witchcraft’ or ‘as a demon’ where the response is prayer or to speak in tongues against the ‘spiritual attack’. While participants agreed that a spiritual perspective is inherent to church responses to domestic abuse, these should not eclipse the actual work of supporting the victims/survivors and involving external agencies.

“...a huge thing is this whole thing of the man of God. You can’t go against the man of God. If they have a specific agenda and a plan, that’s it, because you’re not really gonna get past that without being treated like you’re in sin, you’re rebellious. Its witchcraft and there’s different things we do as believers... ‘I rebuke it in the name of Jesus, the blood of Jesus’. It’s because of your [the leaders] thinking. You are not supposed to do that. You speak in tongues, you do all these things which, that’s almost like numbing methods that they use sometimes just to stop you from thinking because you now have an issue with yourself, because you are thinking differently to how the leadership want you to think.” (A, focus group)

“...whether it’s the man of God or the women of God, it’s about their inability to deal with it. It’s about them not believing that it’s something, while yes you can spiritualise it, but that happens to people, and whether it is a demon that brought it into the house, or whatever it is that brought it into the house, it is still in the house and there is somebody that is suffering and there is somebody who is not living a rosy cosy life.” (C, focus group)

In the extract below BMC leaders can exploit their spiritual power to blind otherwise skilled professionals to work only in the supernatural, therefore not provide a practical response to the person experiencing abuse. BMC congregants who leave their professional hats at the door for a spiritual uplift could lose their common-sense and professional response to domestic abuse, within church spaces. At the dissemination event a few victim-survivors gave testimonies of BMC church leaders only doing couples’ counselling or counselling when they had experienced domestic abuse and this process delayed access to support. One eventually established her own support organisation and another accessed a refuge. The extract below goes some way to describe the processes that could lead to such poor support for victims/survivors.

“you’ve got those who kind of spiritualise it away and they... It’s almost like you see professional people, really professional people, really skilled in their day jobs, but then it comes to the things of God and it’s like they spiritualise everything away, and it’s almost like common sense goes out of the window. If the top man, the man of God has an opinion or a strategy, it’s like everything has to fall into that even if it... you can see it doesn’t seem Biblical. It’s not ethical, it’s not in the victim’s interest.” (A, focus group)

Worry about the church reputation or brand over and above the interests of victims/survivors of domestic abuse can influence and underpins BMC responses. Subthemes within this include *Pandemic and visibility of domestic abuse*, *Preaching abuse domestic abuse in sermons*, *Not in our church* and *Concealing the abuser when he is church leader*.

Pandemic and visibility of domestic abuse within BMCs

For BMCs with old or new style leadership, the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns enabled them renewed/new insight into the extent of domestic abuse within their congregations, with leaders visiting homes to help resolve issues. It also normalised domestic abuse for churches where they could publicly support victims/survivors. This shifted their focus from feeling exposed by the extent of domestic abuse in churches, to building support systems for domestic abuse post pandemic. However, this was reported as being only in a minority of churches. From the main theme above, an ongoing concern in BMCs, is issues such as domestic abuse affected their image/reputation within the community.

“...they were worried of the perception, that...okay it’s another church... you know...something else is going wrong, it’s going to be in the limelight, like child abuse in the Catholic church that was all over the television. It was like we don’t want that shame or that reputation in our house. So, it was kind of... like let’s deal with quietly so it’s not exposed...”

“...what we were dealing with domestic abuse because during the lockdown, just as it was present in the rest of society, it became more prevalent in church and it was more noticeable. And there were other couples, we were hearing about things that were going on, you know during lockdown...quite a few cases that came out during lockdown and some of them apparently had been going on before. Others, because of lockdown and the proximity in the house all the time, exacerbated it more, ... in our previous church there was more structure for dealing with things like that.” (C, focus group)

The Covid-19 pandemic unearthed cases that church leaders might have prior concealed, as well as highlighted the seriousness of domestic abuse, as it did in many spheres of society. However, a cautious response was more commonplace.

“Whereas now coming out post- pandemic, it’s a lot better. It’s almost like churches are now more aware of the support they can give, the signposting they can give... they still don’t want it in their church of course, no one wants abuse.” (N, interview)

“People are really wanting to understand the difference and what that is. Because you know...when the Bible says, ‘submit to your husband’, and your husband is taking all your money [laughs]... you’re like well, I’m just submitting; are you submitting or is that a life of abuse? So, churches are starting to kind of understand the differences.” (N, interview)

“I think that that was what the pandemic brought out for us as a church. It made us work a lot tighter together because you just didn’t see no one, so you had no choice but to work together.” (T, interview)

Pre-pandemic, churches with old and new style leadership were more concerned about their image being tarnished with accounts of abuse. The trust gained working together to support churchgoers during the pandemic, is hopeful for a more effective response post pandemic. Post-pandemic BMCs are tentatively navigating their responses to reports of domestic abuse, a minority with more enthusiasm to learn, change and adapt. The pandemic enabled BMCs to witness the seriousness of domestic abuse, to protect victim/survivors and address the needs of perpetrators.

Concealing the abuser when he is a church leader

There is a tendency in BMCs as with many churches, to want to handle domestic abuse and all other issues with their congregations in-house and to protect the abuser when he is a minister/church leader (Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Nevhutanda, 2019; Richard, 2017). Some argued that the importance of marriage within churches could be influencing this slow, ineffective and dangerous response to domestic abuse by some BMC leaders.

“...churches are known, not just Black churches but White churches, to try and handle things in house and they keep things to themselves rather than going to relevant bodies.” (C, focus group)

“...many pastors are also victims and are shamed by their experience. The belief is that it doesn’t demonstrate faith if you own up to it.” (Survey respondent)

“...very difficult for the women to speak out or leave because of the shame it might bring on the family [when the abuse is also a minister] ...if they spoke out now ...no one would believe them. There was a lot of pressure on doing work together as a couple... you know trying to work through issues, trying to work through why the abuser was always being the way that he was ... you know you are in it together as a couple ... and you know sometimes we need to do this separate; so, you know there was a lack of understanding” (N, interview)

“...getting people to talk, that’s one of the issues because there [are] so many layers of people who will. It’s almost like they’re blinkered. They either know what’s going on and they’re complicit. Or there is [a] spiritual thing whereby, the Man of God, if we speak, we are going to hell and it literally is a stronghold. And so [sighs] yeah there is so much to unpack and there are so many gatekeepers and their adjutants.” (A, focus group)

Speaking about domestic abuse in BMCs is fraught with many difficulties connected to the church leader's own identity and more generally their attempt to live up to a model Christian who is strong in their faith. Having past or current experiences of domestic abuse is constructed in the above extracts as a crisis of faith, a shameful secret for leaders. However, churchgoers are more prepared to share experiences of domestic abuse, even if they wish for no further disclosures. In the extracts above the response of no further disclosures could be because of how leaders responded. Not supporting the victim/survivor and concealing reports of abuse by church leaders, can take on a more sinister turn where they 'know what's going on and they are complicit' or misuse their power and faith to threaten and intimidate fellow church leaders. The phrase "gatekeepers and their adjutants" was expressed during the focus group with church leaders. It perfectly captured the blocking and gatekeeping experienced during the data collection discussed earlier on in the Methodology. Why would churches who are knowingly concealing reports of domestic abuse wish to permit their congregants to speak about the topic for research purposes?

Marriage in churches, BMCs included, are upheld as the model of good Christian living. Some church leaders may over-interpret or distort Biblical scriptures and advise couples to keep marriages intact (Nason-Clark, 2015; Baird & Gleeson, 2018) at whatever cost, including when one spouse is abusing the other.

"...if it is a minister, it is even harder, because his marriage is supposed to be the one that we all look to." (T, focus group)

"...with a lot of church leaders, the ones that I have been under, I think it's about their inability to deal with things like DV, because for them, it's not supposed to happen. So in the ideal marriages, husbands don't beat wives, wives don't beat husbands. They don't mentally torture each other, they laugh, they care, all the things that the Bible tells them to do in the ideal marriages. So for them a lot of the marriages are supposed to be ideal marriages. So when there is like this rotten apple inside the marriage, they are like oh-ho, I dunno what to do, dunno what to do." (T, interview)

"[W]hen I was going through domestic abuse in my marriage the church was not there for me, they made me feel worse and I found no support as some of the saints took sides ..." (Survey respondent)

"He's [the abuser] not being renewed or restored he's just thinking, okay I'm good the way I am, which is ultimately going to cause harm to the marriage... We started to hear from other people, other couples, in situations where it has been similar, the favour is always towards the man. They want the woman to stay basically and put up with it.... Very misogynistic." (C, focus group)

Responses to reports of domestic abuse when both spouses/parties were in the church, ranged from inexperience and unpreparedness, to actively supporting the abuser over the victim/survivor. The ideal model of marriage is insufficiently unpacked to distinguish when difficulties are a result of domestic abuse. There is therefore a stuck-ness to recognise that what is occurring is a crime, involves harm where a sense of urgency to act is the correct response. One of the comments from the dissemination event, is that domestic abuse should be included in pre-marital counselling that churches carry out with couples. The survey respondent's experience of church leaders or 'the saints' taking sides with her abusive spouse underscores this dangerous response and may also explain the hesitance among some churchgoers to report domestic abuse. The above concealment and minimisation of abuse evidence spiritual abuse by church leaders as defined by Abrahams et al., (2019) whereby the trust and esteem held in BMC leaders combined with women congregants' faith, amplifies the impact of this abuse. In Nash and Hesterberg's (2009) study women BMC churchgoers would observe the responses of their peers who had reported domestic abuse and make decisions to stay silent based the outcomes.

Church leaders can only advise couples but have a duty to remove leaders who are also abusers from positions of authority in the church. A response that privileges the abuser or the image of the church in the above examples and found in (Cappel, 2016) will undoubtedly have a negative and deleterious impact on the victim/survivor.

Preaching about domestic abuse in sermons

When church leaders address domestic abuse in sermons, more victims/survivors are likely to report abuse to church leadership teams (c.f. Iistratii and Ali, 2023). BMC churchgoers need to identify and understand domestic abuse and its racial and cultural relevance to them and only church leaders or the main pastor can successfully do this. The pandemic for some churches also enabled them to include domestic abuse in sermons.

"I think people felt they could respond because it was actually being preached from the pulpit, which I thought was a good thing." (C, interview)

"When it comes from the pulpit, it has more power; absolutely... I just can't imagine...when things are not openly spoken about, for example, from the pulpit it doesn't have that... it doesn't have that residue that comes all the way down for people to feel that freedom to discuss it." (K, interview)

"...there are discussions you have in your little groups, you know your friendship groups, but that's what it is. But for the wider church it needs to come from the pulpit. It needs to be saying, 'you know this is our agenda'. For example, when we were running food banks; it was like 'this is our

agenda...we are going to be running a food bank'. And we are not referral based...we want people to come in from our community who are in need." (K, interview)

BMCs are renowned for their social justice agenda (see Kanyeredzi, 2021) and the extracts above speak to the power and impact when topics are addressed in sermons or 'from the pulpit', 'they have more weight', the 'residue comes all the way down' through the hierarchy of leaders, ministers and congregants effecting a whole church response. Few question the initiative, and congregants rally around the issue and support it. This should also be the case for domestic abuse. The extract below speaks to the special relevance for Black or minoritised people when the message about domestic abuse from the pulpit is also racialised or simply made relevant for them.

"...it doesn't have to be somebody in our church's experience ... but people who are like us. Black women, Black men, maybe he's been abused. A Black man whose been abused by his woman, or whatever, I would love it for our church to have these conversations, so that we then can say, 'How?' because it's something that you store in your memory then." (P, interview)

If there isn't a visible or public representation in conversation sermons or public acknowledgement that domestic abuse is in churches and in BMCs, within impacts for Black men, women and families, it is less real and perceived as less of an issue. This again portrays a knowing yet not knowing. In the 'My spiritual uplift...' theme outlined earlier, everyone knows that congregants attend church from a place of brokenness, yet the source of the brokenness, when it is domestic abuse, is not explicitly discussed.

"Not in our church"

Continuing from the discussion of knowing yet not knowing about domestic abuse within BMCs, prior to the pandemic, some participants had experienced churches who addressed domestic abuse in sermons, while for others, the pandemic influenced pastors to address domestic abuse in sermons. More commonly when participants had heard pastors address domestic abuse in sermons, they tended to make indirect references to other churches/ministries in reports about cases "not in our church".

"I think you [another participant] said your church leader spoke about a case from somewhere else, and I think that is part of the problem. When it's in your own doorstep, for some church leaders, it's almost like, then it becomes a taboo and difficult." (C, focus group)

"it's easier to have a case outside so that you can, to mention and then you can just brush it aside." (A, focus group)

"It wasn't DV [domestic violence], it was some abuse. I think it was Hillsongs. And again, he doesn't preach about it, he kinda brushes over it and says you know it is not something that we

preach all the time, but you know I just wanted to highlight this situation, because like you said. It is always easier when it is someone else.” (T, focus group)

The only time you hear about abuse is when some historical or when somebody or some minister gets done for child abuse or rape or something. It’s always like that, but it’s never like a ...here ...we can help you if you are a victim or we can help you if you are a perpetrator.” (K, interview)

Making references to cases of domestic and other forms of abuse ‘not in our church’ is a strategy to deflect addressing cases that are within BMCs. This dismissive approach was argued by participants to be easier for BMC leaders to manage and speak about. In this way they distance their BMC from abuse and maintain their church brand or reputation. Domestic abuse then is not viewed by BMCs who chose to conceal it or not to speak about it, as an issue or concern that the whole church can learn about and develop a response to, but a finger-pointing and distancing exercise.

“My father’s house, is a house of worship’, you know... ‘a den of robbers and thieves and selling’; He [Jesus] went there. He went into all uncomfortable places where ... I feel with church you we are here to mirror him, and we are uncomfortable about things, so, we don’t go there. And any kind of abuse ...we don’t go to...you know.” (K, interview)

In the above extract this distancing approach to speaking about domestic abuse in some BMCs runs counter to the life of Jesus who went everywhere sat with everyone regardless of any associated stigma or taboo attached to them. An appeal is being made to those BMCs to ‘mirror Jesus’ and ‘go there’ with domestic abuse to strengthen the church, the faith or the pastors and congregants. A focus on the church reputation or image being sullied by openly or publicly addressing domestic abuse in BMCs, misses the opportunity to become part of the discussion and community coordinated response (see Aune and Barnes, 2018, Davis and Johnson, 2021; Nason et al., 2018). This practice was rationalised to protect African American men from the harsh criminal justice system. Richard (2017) furthered a general lack of equity for women within the BMCs he researched, reduced domestic abuse on the list of priorities. This was also found in Cappel, (2016) students with women BMC clergy in the UK. During the Covid-19 pandemic some BMCs challenged their being associated with abuse and addressed domestic abuse in sermons or began to design their approach to responding to reports. In this process they discovered that congregants were receptive, while others try to conceal. Abuse can be so well hidden it is unsurprising that religious leaders can be under the impression that it is not occurring in their communities (Damron & Johnson, 2015). Leaders should consider a report of domestic abuse not as attack on the church community, but a

courageous possibly first step the end the violence/abuse and of utmost importance is the safety of the victim survivor (Damron & Johnson, 2015)

What churchgoers who are abused need from churches

This theme captures the qualitative responses to questions in the survey: how the respondents would have liked to respond to the churchgoer who disclosed domestic abuse to them and within this how churches could better respond to victims/survivors. These implied that initial responses were less well-informed by domestic abuse advocacy, law or policy. Survey respondents wanted to be more cautious as to how they included faith in their discussions with victims/survivors. The sensitivity of discussing both domestic abuse and faith required more specialised skills than respondents as fellow churchgoers or leaders, could offer. What the quotations also document, is their learning and development from initial attempts to support victims/survivors. This learning offers promise to those BMCs fearful of reputational damage by mere attempts to offer some form of support to victims/survivors within their spaces. The themes: *Signpost support* and *Spiritual support and counselling* capture respondents' suggestions.

Signpost support

This theme suggests churchgoers cannot solely rely on their empathy when offering support to victims/survivors of domestic abuse. There are specialisms and identified risk factors specific domestic abuse victims/survivors that can equip first responders in their discussions, their own assessments of their capacity to respond, and their decisions to seek further advice. They need to be knowledgeable of the local support services and how to signpost, suggest and make referrals. Here the suggestion of keyworkers strategically placed in BMCs outlined in the *Safeguarding role in BMCs...* theme above would also assist churchgoers in supporting peers who report domestic abuse.

“Find proper support”

“Signpost them. Give them necessary options.”

“I would report it to an agency outside of the church”

“Find all the available support they needed, would pray with them” “Encourage them to report the abuse to authorities, refer to local support services”

The suggestions above capture preferred actions for survey respondents who had supported victim/survivors of domestic abuse and suggestions from previous research on interventions (Aune and Barnes, 2018; Kim and Menzie, 2015, Stennis et al., 2015; Wagman et al., 2012). Key to preferred responses above and below is to integrate prayer or spiritual support with more practical support.

Listen more to the person

Survey respondents recognised that they might have acted on behalf of the victims/ survivors, rather than were sensitised to what the person wanted. In the first instance the victim/survivor wanted to be listened to. This theme expands on the earlier theme of *Domestic abuse is in church...* that congregants disclose and want their disclosures to stay with the hearer and to not go further. This theme provides an explanatory framework where ill-advised responses or a perception that further action might harm victims/survivors.

“Just be there.”

“I wish I was more open for them, to be the with them more in time of need”

“Sit and listen to them, find all the available support they needed, would pray with them and show sympathy and empathy”

“Be supportive, validate their experience and emotions, safeguard them”

“I will first listen to the victim”

Be supportive, spend time with them, listen if they want to vent/ talk without offering advice and solution[s].”

Listening and being supportive to the victim/survivor marked a re-ordering of activities surrounding support for fellow churchgoers for survey respondents and speaks to the absence within some BMCs of education about to domestic abuse. Putting this together with the knowing and not knowing about domestic abuse, found in earlier themes provides insight into how victims/survivors might be (mis)treated when they reach out for support within some BMCs.

Churchgoers who were also leaders tended to prioritise confidentiality in responses to questions about how they would support another BMC congregant in future. They also mentioned ‘belief’ and non-judgemental approach to the victim/survivor. Given the themes above where old-style leadership might try to conceal abuse when the abuser is also a pastor, believing the victim can be an even more powerful form of support within this context.

“Many churchgoers don’t want others to know their ordeal”

“Be confidential.”

“Providing confidential listening ears”

“Listen and be discrete.”

"Listen to them and support their plan."

"Zero gossip. Private prayer. "

"Prayer, listening ear, practically"

"Listen and BELIEVE the victim."

"Believe them"

"Empathy towards victims, not castigation."

"No victim blaming or shaming."

From the above quotes, confidentiality or the mishandling of sensitive information were issues in the BMCs survey respondents had attended. Or, that BMC spaces are not yet sufficiently sensitised to safety issues and risks in relation to domestic abuse, despite congregants functioning in secular roles outside of the church.

Spiritual support and counselling

Similar to interview and focus group participants, survey respondents also highlighted the importance of spirituality and prayer when supporting victims/survivors of domestic abuse in BMCs advised to not 'spiritualise' the issues. Praying with and for the victim/survivor and the abuser was also raised. Prayer was the first step, before counselling victims/survivors or those who were abusers. Another concern was to share cases with a more senior elder or pastor with the caveat that this elder/pastor does not conceal the abuse. "Spiritualise" was the term used in the focus group with church leaders and interviews to describe how quoting scriptures from the Bible can be a tactic to minimise domestic abuse or to control pastors or congregants who challenge inadequate responses. These themes could explain underusage of refuges by BMCs congregants who are victims/survivors or an unmet need for those service users.

"Being with them throughout. Praying for both parties. Believing them."

"Not be scared or embarrassed to talk about it. "

"As a congregation we would pray; someone to talk to, support if they wanted to get away from the abusive situation."

"By praying with the victim."

"Supporting them during this time offer a listening ear and pray."

"Provided counselling with God's leading"

"Pray with them, read biblical examples with them. Talk through options/solutions. Advise them to talk to leaders (pastors)."

"Allow them to share their experiences with the elders."

"- speak to the leader of the church if they themselves are not bullies. - pray with them and encourage them that they are not alone."

"Also not relating struggles to the lord"

"Reassure them it's not in Christ's plan for them to endure abuse."

"Talking, running workshops for the victim and the abuser."

"Do not judge but support the person, seek Christian counselling"

"Give advice of ways out Counselling. And know there is a way out. Someone to talk to."

Domestic abuse when occurring in the church from the above extracts, is fixable and the abuser is a spoken about as present and part of the work that is being done with those affected. This concurs with previous research on BMCs showing that those who are abusers and congregants tend to remain within church communities (see for example Richard, 2017). What the above quotations reveal is the learning gained among participants including those who were also church leaders from having supported a person reporting domestic abuse. Many of their suggestions are in line with specialised domestic abuse agencies' advice with the important addition of Christian counselling and prayer for congregants who are victim/survivors supporting previous research findings (ElKoury et al., 2004; Mattis, et al., 2007; Gillum, Sullivan and Bybee 2006; Potter, 2007; Nash and Hesterberg, 2009; Yick; 2008). Arguably, trying to counsel both victim/survivor and abuser within the same church community raises important safety issues and from earlier themes, dangerous for the victim/survivors.

Conclusions

Survey respondents were experts in BMCs with many years' membership, six who were church leaders. Church leaders who participated were invested in domestic abuse prevention, effective, reflexive and evidenced good practice in supporting churchgoers some had referred to domestic abuse agencies, one supports one or two people per month. Churchgoers learned by experience how to support victims/survivors in BMCs and training could be more formalised and underscored by addressing domestic abuse in sermons. Their definitions of domestic abuse revealed knowledge and concerned about domestic

abuse. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed (94%) that domestic abuse should be addressed in churches. Well over a third of churchgoer survey respondents had supported a fellow churchgoer reporting abuse. Comments reflected learning from initial, judgmental, and unhelpful responses such as acting on behalf of the person. The survey data revealed the importance of prayer in the BMC responses to domestic abuse. Survey responses also revealed the absence or limited presence of domestic abuse in BMC sermons, or posters in churches, less than found in Aune and Barnes, (2018) UK study of churches. However, just over a third had listened to an invited speaker on domestic abuse in their BMCs. Survey respondents wanted to be more cautious as to how they included faith in their discussions with victims/survivors. The sensitivity of discussing both domestic abuse and faith required more specialised skills than respondents as fellow churchgoers or leaders, could offer. This learning offers promise to those BMCs fearful of reputational damage by association with domestic abuse (discussed further below).

13 victim survivors responded to the anonymity of the survey. They represented 38% of the sample a prevalence similar to previous studies and in churches, with emotional abuse the most commonly reported (Aune and Barnes, 2018). We need to understand the true prevalence of domestic abuse in BMCs and a more simplified and widely distributed survey should be carried out. Most had experienced domestic abuse in the past and had sought support from family and friends, and well over half from fellow churchgoers, with mixed responses, when negative, tended to be judgmental. The most common forms of abuse experienced were emotional abuse, followed by physical abuse and coercive/controlling behaviour. Those reporting abuse tended to be younger.

Five people sought support from churchgoers. The most common response from churchgoers were judgement, but this was slightly less common than the rating for being supported by close family/friends. Of the five who sought support from fellow churchgoers, three would again seek such support. This indicates that without the blocking and gatekeeping from churches/leaders that occurred in the data collection, more could have been gleaned from victim/survivors within BMCs. Interviewees also disclosed abuse experiences, both indicate BMC victims/survivors might require more anonymous/confidential routes to support within church communities. Comfort levels in speaking to pastors about difficulties were significantly correlated with comfort levels speaking to churchgoers about difficulties. Additionally, respondents tended to be more comfortable in speaking about difficulties to churchgoers or pastors with age. Those who had supported fellow churchgoers also tended to be younger in age.

The qualitative data revealed much more was required from BMCs. BMCs were well-loved by participants who wanted to promote their growth and development, especially in domestic abuse support. Attending church was described as fellowshiping with likeminded people, acceptance without judgement

that removes daily stressors. Likened to visiting a spiritual spa where guests can feel safe, decompress, receive nourishment, experience family, togetherness and support from pastoral teams, church leaders, and the main pastor. Culture can be exploited both by BMC congregants and leadership because of the special place and power BMCs hold in churchgoers' lives within racist/racialised societies. This also means that BMCs should be facilitating discussions about links between forms of abuse including racism and silence about domestic abuse that can be present in congregations especially among Black women congregants.

While participants were passionate about their connections and attendance to BMCs, as places to heal their brokenness, for mutual and racialised support, this special power held by pastors could be wielded against them through reporting of domestic abuse and especially where this involved a church leader. Findings echoed recent studies on BMCs in the USA more, (Davis and Johnson, 2021; Williams and Jenkins, 2019; Skull, 2022) and in the UK (Cappel, 2016). While everyone knows that congregants attend church from a place of brokenness, when the source of this brokenness is domestic abuse, it might not be explicitly discussed or addressed. Throughout the qualitative data, participants described BMC leadership styles using binary couplets: Old Testament/New Testament, Little/Big, Independent/Umbrella, Windrush/Post-Windrush, to describe the culture and leadership styles within BMCs. This designation predicted how a BMC might respond to reports of domestic abuse. The distinction between old and new style leadership was a key indicator of BMC responses to domestic abuse where churches with new style leadership were found to be more supportive. However old and new did not reflect the ages of the leaders; churches lead by younger pastors and whose positions might have been handed down from parents, could continue to lead using the old style. A leadership review/culture change regarding domestic abuse is required both in old and new-style BMCs because aspects of both can prevent identification of domestic abuse as racially relevant and (in)directly conceal abuse and abusers. Not wanting to identify with domestic abuse also meant opting out of the current study. Old style leadership is controlling and where pastors conceal domestic abuse and new style leaders fostering better responses albeit without fully taking ownership of domestic abuse as present in their churches.

How BMCs manage reports of domestic abuse is dependent not only on their style of leadership but their reputation/brand within communities. Trying to maintain a clean image of Christianity, Black families in a context where there have been cases of abuse in BMCs and the wider social landscape of institutional abuse in Catholic churches, influence church leaders to want to distance their churches from abuse. This can extend to protecting leaders who are also abusers, because having a leader who is also an abuser, signals failure or ineptitude as leaders in electing fellow leaders who fall far from expectations. All might result in losing congregants. Speaking about domestic abuse in BMCs is fraught with many difficulties connected to the church leader's own identity and more generally their attempt to live up to a model

Christian who is strong in their faith. However, churchgoers are more prepared to share experiences of domestic abuse, even if they wish for no further disclosures. Responses to reports of domestic abuse when both spouses/parties were in the church, ranged from inexperience and unpreparedness, to actively supporting the abuser over the victim/survivor. The ideal model of marriage is insufficiently unpacked to distinguish when difficulties are a result of domestic abuse. One of the comments from the dissemination event, is that domestic abuse should be included in pre-marital counselling that churches carry out with couples.

When church leaders limit reference to cases of domestic and other forms of abuse 'not in our church' this deflects addressing cases that are within BMCs. This dismissive approach was argued by participants to be easier for BMC leaders to manage and speak about. In this way they distance their BMC from abuse and maintain their church brand or reputation. Survey respondents and interviewees argued that it was the responsibility, both spiritually and practically of church leaders to manage and lead on domestic abuse. When church leaders addressed domestic abuse in sermons more congregants came forward for support. The power of church leaders to affect change and to exploit this very power to conceal abusers and blame victims/survivors. Building trusting relationships with a key person enable BMC churchgoers to feel safe when disclosing domestic abuse and other confidential issues. Given that some leaders may also be abusive, participants suggested wider safeguarding training and that the church alone is insufficient to respond to domestic abuse. Participants identified a myriad of issues with safeguarding in BMCs: it's limited scope and minimal inclusion of domestic abuse and the general lack of safeguarding training for church volunteers. Given the size of some BMCs this warrants consideration for the complex ways that attending church could present people who perpetrate abuse, access to potential targets for victimisation.

BMC congregants could also volunteer more as part of the church response to domestic abuse. Given that all including those who are victim/survivors of domestic abuse may be coming to church to unburden, the question of who does this work hung uncomfortably among participants. 'Spiritualising' the reasons for not using their social work, legal and professional skills within church spaces, presents a challenge for a BMC response to domestic abuse.

In summary this study provides evidence that BMCs are evolving as spaces to address domestic abuse (Davis and Johnson, 2021; Williams and Jenkins, 2019) and could go further. They are safe spaces for everything else, but churches need to tackle leadership cultures/styles and widen their remit of support. If churches can help a congregant repair a car and do pre-marital counselling, they can support domestic abuse. BMCs are already responding to reports of domestic abuse but with secrecy. Churches are concerned about their branding being tarnished by domestic abuse. This runs counter to theological

teachings about the church, the life of Jesus and participants' expectations. During Covid-19 BMCs were commended by congregants for tackling domestic abuse. Furthermore, secrecy about domestic abuse might be closing forestalling important conversations for Black women, where congregants encourage internalised strength as the only route to manage domestic abuse. BMC attendance is racialised and race, racism and racialisation can be more explicitly linked to domestic abuse.

The safeguarding role is insufficiently implemented within BMCs. Once church accept BMCs as spaces for addressing domestic abuse, they can sensitise rather than block congregants to participation in research calls. Linked to this is that BMC congregants have professional skills and could be more supported to volunteer on domestic abuse within churches. Discussions about what is permitted within the volunteer/churchgoer roles should be opened by church leaders to assist churchgoers who may struggle with what they can do within the 'spiritual/natural and secular' binary so that they can wear their professional hats and carry out those within church.

Victims/survivors and churchgoers are ready for BMCs to tackle domestic abuse. Those in the data wanted churches to respond better and those in the audience at the dissemination event of over 60 attendees agreed. BMCs could be bolder in managing domestic abuse.

Limitations:

This was a small study of mostly middle-aged Caribbean/Black British women and is difficult to generalize to the 500, 000 BMCs within the UK. However, the results were validated as authentic within the experiences of the over 60 attendees of the dissemination event, many of whom were victim/survivors and in media discussions with pastors. A larger sample and with more victims/survivors could further support/refute findings.

The survey had a complex branching design that could be much more simplified.

The approach to data collection was in the wrong order as articulated by the RF earlier in the Methodology. Taking a more traditional participatory and action research route of building relationships through key stakeholders, was an insufficient recruitment strategy. Recruiting BMC communities should initially include facilitating a public event that builds trust to participate, hear the voices of victims/survivors to encourage leaders and BMCs to support the research.

However, the study/dissemination identified and brought together the broader work of victims/survivors/activists within BMCs on domestic abuse in collaboration with social work and specialised agencies. The study further raised domestic abuse in BMCs above the parapet to connect and

continue discussions. This also reveals this work has many silos and more could be done to address the silence and secrecy surrounding domestic abuse in BMCs.

Recommendations:

1. BMC leaders can and should do more to address domestic abuse and historic child abuse. It as an issue/concern for congregants.
2. To help more victims/survivors come forward, BMCs should be more public about their domestic abuse support: sermons and signposting. This is a difficult and there is help available from www.bcdaf.org.uk & www.restored-uk.org
3. All church leaders and volunteers should complete full safeguarding training and work with external domestic/child abuse agencies.
4. Church leaders should make space for congregants who are skilled professionals to advise/lead on domestic abuse support, and to help churchgoers unpack the 'spiritual and the secular/natural' dilemma in their roles.
5. Church leaders who are abusers should be reported, removed from leadership and undergo intervention.
6. Churches should review and revise their leadership styles especially if the culture is the 'old style' dictatorial/controlling approach. This can repeat the harms and mimic the tactics domestic abuse perpetrators, detrimental for victims/survivors.
7. BMC leaders should regularly share with peers, experiences/skills on tackling domestic abuse.
8. BMC leaders/churches' responses to the research are also related to their racialised positions within the UK, where public discussions on domestic/child abuse in African and Caribbean communities remain uncomfortable/shunned. BMCs should also create spaces for these discussions.

PI Reflexivity

Shortly after the project began, I was admitted to hospital after what was supposed to be a routine procedure. I therefore struggled to engage with the project as I was literally trying to survive. Towards the very end of the project, and shortly after attending the dissemination event, Conrad, my stepfather suddenly passed away. R.I.P. Neither the RF nor I could have imagined the life/health/death experiences that would co-occur alongside this project.

During the earlier stages of the project, I wanted to re(read) the Bible to gain a more enriched insight into the faith/spiritual contexts of study participants and BMCs. I identify as Christian now regularly attend church. I had had sporadic church attendance since researching violence and abuse (2010 – 2020)

and discovering from research participants that churches were spaces that could harbour men who had abused women when they were children. Churches were also spaces where women found peace, they could cry without being questioned. Through my years of sporadic church attendance, I returned for the biggies; birthdays, weddings Christmas, Easter, funerals, and sometimes just to quietly sit. I still had a strong faith but was not fellowshipping as I knew I should. I had also been a member of the BCDAF that is Christian in orientation.

During the course of the current study, I re(read) the Bible, joined a weekly prayer group run by friends and a BMC near where I live. I now pray more and have revived my faith and outlook on life, work and research. My pastor and fellow churchgoers attended and spoke at the dissemination event. I never imagined this project (and near-death!) would renew my faith in such a profound way, an unexpected blessing and gift from this project. Towards the end of the project, I am reading the last chapter of the Bible, Revelations, more steeped in my faith and BMC community.

However, when I resumed the project after illness, I was sorely disappointed. I had done what I considered the suggestions for participatory research; built relationships with BMC networks mostly through my work in the BCDAF and over a number of years. I wondered whether the years I had invested in collaborating with fellow concerned Christians were worthwhile. I had ended up exhausted, ill during the process without what I considered to be a good sample reflecting my investiture. I also feared my health would relapse. I feared negative backlash because of the sample size and findings.

I persevered out of my faith. I knew this was a project that had to be completed. In 2019 while on sabbatical I had an epiphany where I felt God say to stop all existing projects and work only on this one - the current study. That process took a lot longer to implement, but eventually this study became my sole research project. As I write the ending to this report, I firmly agree with dissemination attendees that we are at the beginning of a much larger project in which I am still humbled to participate.

In contrast to the RF's reflexive account of how the gate-keeping and blocking experienced in the research, influenced her to question her faith in people, my process across this project, has strengthened my faith in general and my faith in people. My orientation towards my faith has also been influenced by this process. In the interviews and data analysis where participants discussed reasons for going to church, I could intimately relate to these, not just from my childhood experiences, but current church attendance. Despite my fledgling insider BMC experiences, alike The RF I am mostly an outsider regarding influence within this sector. However, our insider-outsider positioning has enabled us to reach out and connect to victims/survivors within BMCs, through the current study and more effectively through the dissemination event and beyond. While our process of research was frustratingly disappointing, it also enriched our

understanding of the contexts for victims/survivors within some BMCs. I remain optimistic to participate in collaborations within this field. There is still so much to do.

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Dissemination articles:

[I've been researching domestic abuse in Black majority churches. Here's what survivors have told me | Real Life | Premier Christianity](#)

['Church must recognise domestic abuse' - Voice Online \(voice-online.co.uk\)](#)

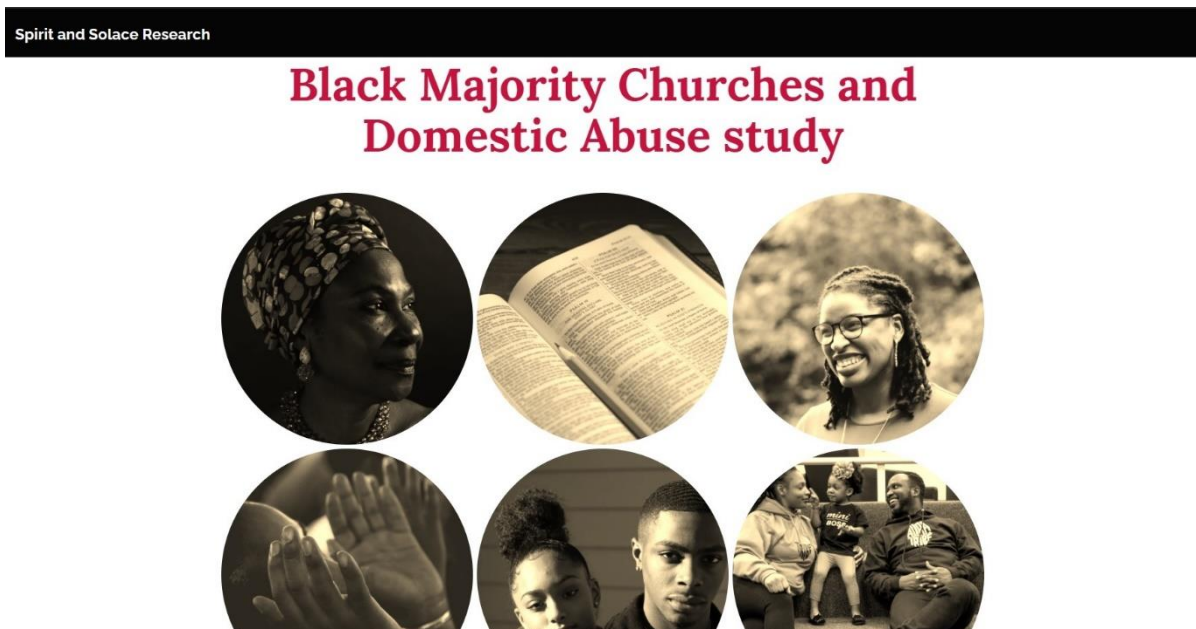
[Churches Can Prevent DVA Through Their Sermons – Keep The Faith © The UK's Black and multi-ethnic Christian magazine](#)

Project website:

<https://spiritandsolace.com/>

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Recruitment Flyer



Do you attend a church where the congregants are mostly African or Caribbean?

We are trying to find out what it is like for people/women to report or seek support for Domestic Abuse from Churches.

Could you please spare 10 minutes to complete our Survey?

The study has been approved by the University of East London Research Ethics Committee and is funded by a **BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grant SRG2021\210837**. For questions about the study, please email Dr Ava Kanyeredzi a.kanyeredzi@uel.ac.uk, <https://spiritandsolace.com>

If you know anyone else who would like to take part, please share:

<https://tinyurl.com/DomesticAbuseBMC>

Appendix 2: Dissemination Event Flyer

SPIRIT AND SOLACE:
BLACK CHURCHES & DOMESTIC ABUSE
LEARNING AND SHARING EVENT

SHEILA BELGRAVE MBA
SAB Consultancy

ASHIEDU JOEL
Domestic Abuse and Faith Specialist

DR. ZINA ARINZE
International Transformational Speaker and Lawyer

VICTORIA LAWRENCE
Church Relationship Manager and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Lead, The Bible Society

9TH MARCH 2023
6 PM - 8 PM

ADDRESS:
University Square
University of East London
Stratford Campus
1 Salway Place
London E15 1NF

PANELLISTS INCLUDE:
Dr. Ava Kanyeredzi
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Findings from recent research on domestic abuse and Black churches, including panel and audience discussions, poetry by 'Poetic Voices'!