

Bridging the gap between steeple and shelter

UNB researchers connect religious leaders, domestic violence victims globally

An increasing number of people from around the world are reaching out to researchers at the University of New Brunswick to learn more about how to deal with domestic violence.

Dr. Nancy Nason-Clark, a UNB sociology professor, launched the Religion and Violence E-Learning Project (RAVE), four years ago. It began after she discovered through her research that there was a disconnect between religious communities and programs for physically or emotionally abused people.



She said people of faith, who are also victims or survivors of domestic abuse, are sometimes unsure of what to do when in an abusive situation because they have strong ideals about marriage and forgiveness.

“They don’t want to appear untrue in their beliefs. And part of the problem is when they do reach out for help, often their religious leader is unprepared to deal with a domestic violence situation,” she said. “We had all of this research, so this project and website became a wonderful way to translate it into something tangible not only for domestic violence victims and their families, but also for religious leaders, criminal justice teams, and advocacy and therapeutic teams. We’ve found a way to bridge the gap between the steeple and the shelter.”

The website, www.theraveproject.org, is based on nearly 25 years of research. It offers best practices for helping victims, Bible studies for raising awareness about the issue, ideas for sermons about domestic violence, and a list of resources and shelters available throughout North America.

It was launched in 2007, but its popularity has since sky-rocketed. Thousands of seminary students, religious leaders, abuse victims and community leaders have reached out to the UNB team through the RAVE project.

Every week, on average, 2,000 unique computer addresses access the website. Dr. Nason-Clark’s team is also in high demand for presentations, workshops and one-on-one meetings with clergy members



around the world. Research sites in Fredericton, North Carolina, Missouri, Calgary and Oregon have been established to help with the project.

Rev. Steve McMullin, a UNB PhD candidate and Acadia Divinity College faculty member, has been involved in the RAVE project since its inception. He has experienced firsthand why this project and research is important.

“I was a pastor for 27 years and in that time, I have been involved with many families who have dealt with domestic violence,” Rev. McMullin said. “Unfortunately, RAVE wasn’t available at

the time and I often felt unqualified to help. I've also been approached many times by seminary students or religious leaders looking for advice on how to help a domestic violence victim. That's why I felt it was important to get involved with RAVE.

"I want to make certain we can connect those people to these important resources and bring churches and local agencies together so we can all be better informed and prepared to help prevent and curb instances of domestic violence," he added.

The primary RAVE team in New Brunswick includes Nason-Clark, McMullin, Barbara Fisher-Townsend and Cathy Holtmann. They will present their research during the 80th Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences being co-hosted by UNB and St. Thomas University from May 28 to June 4.

Nason-Clark said they will also share advice on how to take social sciences research and translate it into concrete deliverables for use at the grassroots level.

"We've learned that when you harness technology in a number of ways, present data in innovative ways and invite people to view that data, it can lead to social change," she said. "That's why we're so excited about Congress. As individual faculty members, we labour in our offices and on our computers, but it's when you start collaborating and challenging your research – like so many of the delegates will do during Congress – that you really can start to make a difference and translate what you do and what you're passionate about to a wider public."

About Nancy Nason-Clark and Steve McMullin

Dr. Nancy Nason-Clark is a professor in and chairperson of UNB's sociology department. She teaches a variety of undergraduate and graduate sociology courses in research methods, gender, religion and violence. With her writing and editing skills, Dr. Nason-Clark has been involved in six books on domestic violence.

In recent years, her research and writing has focussed on issues of violence in the family context and issues of faith or spirituality. Her research program involves a variety of projects examining the relationship between abuse, faith, gender and culture; and has taken her to many parts of the world, most recently to India, Eastern Europe, and the Caribbean.

She says one of the most rewarding aspects of her work continues to be interacting with the great graduate students she has the privilege to supervise.

Dr. Nason-Clark has a PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science, a master's degree from the University of Waterloo, and bachelor of science degree from Houghton College.

Rev. Steve McMullin grew up in Woodstock, N.B., and is a graduate of Atlantic Baptist College, Acadia University, and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He is in the final stages of completing his PhD in sociology at the University of New Brunswick. He has taught at UNB's Fredericton and Saint John campuses and at Crandall University.

His dissertation research focuses on ways that churches are affected by and respond to the secularization of society. In a survey of seminary students in Canada and the United States, he has also studied how best to prepare church leaders to respond effectively to victims of domestic violence. He has written articles for both scholarly and popular journals and has presented papers at a number of academic conferences. He was recently appointed as the program chair for the 2011 annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Milwaukee.

He served as a pastor in both urban and rural settings for 27 years.

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact Jennifer Gavin, Congress 2011 Communications Officer, at jgavin@unb.ca or 506-453-4990.