

# Rise Up against Domestic Abuse

## Campaign Launch

Mary Sumner House, May 2024

Readings: Psalm 116:1 and Luke 4:16-19

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My name is Rod, I have had the privilege for nearly 6 years now of being Diocesan Chaplain to a neighbouring diocese, Chelmsford and I have absolutely loved my time serving the diocese, trustee board and meeting MU members.

Indeed, the last time I was in this chapel here at Mary Sumner House was some 20 years ago, and it feels something of a homecoming. I had just joined the Mother's Union, (one of fewer men on the membership role), and we were here on a Deanery visit in which I had the chance to tour different parts of the building with others, and to come and be in this space here. And so as I say, it feels something of a homecoming to be here today.

I'm also well aware that it's something of a privilege too. I want to thank you for the invitation to share a few words here this afternoon. I hope what I can offer will give us food for thought and encourage all of us as we take our part within this campaign. I'm aware also of the use of my voice and my experience and I hope today as I speak, I can speak other people's truths and stories. I hope through what I say, I can inform, and I hope empower.

So let me start with a story about listening, because for me at the heart of this campaign is the need to listen and we heard those words from Psalm 116 v1, "He chooses to bend down to listen." God will always lean in to be beside us, to listen to us.

But do we really listen? I did recently hear the story about a Baptist minister in the United States. His name is Howard Finster, he worked out that during his many years in ministry he had delivered some 4,625 sermons, 400+ funerals and had taken over 200 weddings. He decided to audit what those listening had taken from his words. Well, no-one could remember a single thing that he had said through all of those different sermons! I hope it's different today!

Now in fairness, research has shown that if we go back to the year 2000, so just 24 odd years ago, people's average attention span was just 11 seconds! Yes, eleven seconds was all we could manage before we were distracted by something else. The most recent research goes back to 2015 and it had shortened further, 8 seconds. It certainly makes you think differently about how you act in the world and the time you are able to offer others. Those meetings we have with people, giving them our time, listening to them. It's so counter-cultural to what happens in our world today, and so often I know we can give far more than 8 or 11 seconds.

So, for me listening is key. If I was being cruel I'd ask you the name of the Baptist minister I mentioned earlier? Just to check whether you were listening of course! Obviously you all remembered it was Howard Finster.

As we take our part in this campaign then, listening is key.

Listening for me is at the very heart of it, we know too the power of being listened to. Whether it's domestic abuse survivors' groups, places to be able to share stories and for others to listen, or other issues that have affected our lives, when we are able to talk to somebody who sits and listens, we feel seen and valued.

This seems especially true in our world now. Our world today with God at the heart of it, doesn't always feel like it's full of joy, indeed there are many places of darkness, and it feels even more important then, that we take the power we have to listen, to be alongside, and when it is necessary to rise up.

As we look to our world today, I want to share some encouraging words from a Christian writer, W H Vanstone in his book 'Love's endeavour, Love's expense' he says '*The activity of God in creation must be precarious, it must proceed by no assured program, it's progress like every progress of love must be an angular progress in which each triumph contains a new potential tragedy and in each tragedy there may be redemption into a wider triumph*'.

We have to let go he says, we have to acknowledge our world is made up of tragedy, but there is love at the heart of it. In letting go, there is jeopardy, there is a chance that everything we do could be on the brink of failure, but we're told we need to let go, for it is God's world, God's creation and he asks us to serve within it.

Importantly he doesn't just leave us with that knowledge. Vanstone, also reminds us that in all we do, creation is already safe, we are safe, because God is at the heart of it. God loves you. God loves this fallen broken messed up world full of wheat but also weeds too. There is good and evil. There will always be things that can happen that break our hearts, but God never stops loving us. Each is known, each is loved, and each is heard and seen by God.

I pray that for each who needs to hear that today, to know that on their hearts, that whatever life has brought them so far, through the tragedies they may have faced, and we think particularly of the victims of domestic abuse, that they know they are loved by God, seen, valued, listened to. And we, as the membership in this campaign, may just be the people having those conversations who can do just that.

That sense of good and bad in our world is captured in the reading we just heard from Luke. There is a sense that even taking those words that Jesus reads back to Isaiah, that in time, God will come to redeem all things. We are pointed to a better time when God will comfort, provide, protect and praise all those in need of it. But he doesn't seek to fulfil that on his own. With the gift of God's presence around us and the Holy Spirit marked powerfully again just last weekend at Pentecost, and the inclusivity of the Trinity which many will mark this coming Sunday it is a powerful reminder to use all that we are all in relationship with God. That we share in that responsibility to change, to transform, to listen, to rise up.

The Church of England National Safeguarding, Learning and Development manager Dr Hannah Thompson, (there are more words about her research on the Rise Up website), she said 'domestic abuse is the most prevalent form of abuse within our society and the church plays an important part in recognising and responding to this complex social problem that impacts people, communities and services right across our society. Church should be a place of support for people experiencing abuse, but too often she says it is a place that creates barriers and difficulties.'

A recent study undertaken in partnership with the Mother's Union and the National Safeguarding Team highlighted that we still have some way to go to ensure anyone experiencing domestic abuse feels safe and supported by their church and community. We still have much work to do.

Now we might wish that God would just appear and remove all the weeds and the bad and the tragedy from our world, but the reality is, going back to Vanstone's words, we live alongside it, trusting in Him, as we do. We live amongst one another too, trying to do all that we can from where we are, knowing God loves us. But too often, there is hesitancy, too often there's a sense of we'll do it tomorrow or the next day, there's no sense of urgency.

This campaign reminds us of the urgency and the need to act now!

We are the ones who as part of this campaign can seek to model something different. Amazing people, taking risks, taking risks to support those who have suffered at the hands of domestic abuse. In our own Chelmsford diocese, we're so proud of the various things that are happening there. Not least the work that Phyllis does with the Thrive Survivors Group in Epping. Empowering women she says and listening to their stories is at the heart of what she and the team do.

So to conclude, by listening for God's word, by listening for his teaching, God will continue to shape us and nourish us. By listening, really listening, think about that verse from psalm 116, we too are invited to bend down and to listen others.

By doing so we'll see beyond the weeds and instead see the beauty, the miracles, the joy and the hope that exists in our world. I encourage us all to play our part and Rise Up against domestic abuse.

Amen.

The Very Revd Rod Reid  
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