

## MACSAS CONFERENCE 2009 – EDINBURGH Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2009

**Summary of Key Note Presentations:** Lesley Orr, Theologian

### **A Reflection**

For 15 years I have engaged with churches in a discourse on the violence against women in the church. "Out of the Shadows: Christianity & Violence against women in Scotland" engaged with the reality of clergy abuse of women.

The abuse of adult women by ministers and priests is hard to be heard. As Margaret Kennedy sets out in her PhD the church views these incidents as 'Affairs'. They are considered minor disciplinary matters and the minister gets no more than a rap on the knuckles.

What are the Bishops doing when cases are reported? One Cardinal told a woman who had been abused and made pregnant by a priest that she should have an abortion.

**Challenging some of the Theological underpinning of the churches will make little difference to the reality of the dynamics at the heart of the churches: it's about power, sex and morality. We must recognise the overwhelming importance of the power of the institutions and the lack of accountability which is a byproduct of maintaining this power.**

Whilst I acknowledge the theological challenges and dangers I and other have been driven away from institutional church communities by lived experience. **The abuse position and abuse of women in the church is not a theological aberration, it is an expression of the prevailing theological dynamics (James Poling).**

I wrote a report on the abuse of women by ministers for the URC a few years ago. These are liberal good people. What I found was a depth of abuse and suffering and abuse of power. There was a spinelessness and lack of courage shown from the church authorities which left me deeply cynical about church and theology.

I am working with alternative communities, with people who have come out of the institutional church. I am not sure the institutional churches have the capacity to transform the discourse, nor whether it can happen within the institutions.

As Poling has said, the Christian story dramatizes relationships that include abusive power.

The churches must hear the voices of the abused. Yet in my experience the churches have shown time and again a lack of human care; the church is careless of the consequences for victims.

We must start telling empowering stories rather than disempowering stories.