

A therapist and counsellor behind two pioneering social projects tells Peter Stanford that religious faith plays a complex role in domestic abuse in the season when it reaches a peak

# Safe at Christmas

**T**HERE IS STILL much in the modern-day Christmas for us to celebrate, from fuller-than-usual churches to parties bringing far-flung families and fragmented communities together. In the case of Nikki Dhillon Keane, counsellor, government adviser and founder of two pioneering social programmes under the umbrella of Westminster Diocese, this Christmas will be spent as always with her husband, grown-up daughter and extended family in the north London parish where she grew up. But her professional life – she is marking 25 years at what is now called Caritas Westminster – has given her an insight into a much darker, too-little mentioned side of the festive season.

At Christmas there is always a spike in domestic violence, with charities in the field seeing a 50 per cent increase in calls to their helplines. Dhillon Keane says such “hidden” suffering is one of the reasons why she launched Safe in Faith in 2021 to offer “faith-literate” support all the year round to those subjected to domestic abuse. It is the only such service in the country.

Dhillon Keane traces her involvement in this groundbreaking initiative back to 1998 when a friend drew her attention to an advert in *The Tablet* for a post at Westminster Deaf Service. Recently graduated, she applied and got the job. Qualified in British Sign Language (BSL) and already doing counselling training, she quickly clocked that there were few, if any, counsellors available to members of the deaf community who were able to hold sessions in BSL. So, in 2001, she started Signs of Hope, funded by the diocese.

She was startled to learn that one in two deaf women is subjected to domestic abuse over her lifetime (against one in four of all women in the UK). Why the disparity? “Because perpetrators pick on vulnerabilities. If you are deaf, it can be harder to get access to support.” And there was also, she discovered, a faith angle. “Very little was said at the time about how the experience of domestic abuse might be different if you are someone with a faith, and how sometimes that faith can be weaponised by the perpetrator.”

Dhillon Keane refers to this as “spiritual abuse”, a form of coercive control. It can pull victims in opposite directions. “On the one hand, you have this faith and this faith community, and that can give you strength. On the other, you’ve got a faith community that might not understand what you are going



NIKKI DHILLON KEANE

through, and might make judgements about leaving [an abusive relationship] and making yourself safe, might pressurise you not to do that, and might give you misinformation about what it means spiritually to do that.”

Spiritual abuse can, she says, take many forms: forcing someone to practise a faith

they don’t believe in; preventing them from practising their faith; or ridiculing it. “Scripture will be cherry-picked by the perpetrator and those who suffer it are told, ‘No, you have to respect me,’ or ‘You have to do what I say.’ It can include demands for forgiveness – ‘You call yourself a Christian

...’ or ‘You can’t leave this marriage, you’ve made promises before God.’ When those words get internalised, it can feel like the voice of God.”

One story she shares is that of a married Catholic woman whom she calls Maggie (not her real name). “After many years of very dangerous abuse, she went to her priest for help. He told her she had to think about what she had done wrong to make her husband behave like that, what she could do to be a better wife, and to pray for him and thank God for her suffering. She knew in her heart that that wasn’t right, so she went to her local [secular] domestic abuse service and they told her, ‘Don’t be a Catholic. Give up your faith.’”

Maggie eventually came to see Dhillon Keane and “got safe”. Dhillon Keane quotes her example, she stresses, not to criticise publicly provided, secular domestic abuse services. “They are run by amazing colleagues who do phenomenal work.” Yet it shows that they can also be faith-illiterate. “I have a sense that for them faith is just another oppression that people need to cast off. But we need a more nuanced view, because Maggie couldn’t give up her faith. It was the one thing that kept her going.”

Safe in Faith provides support for people like Maggie, as well as training therapists who don’t have a faith themselves but want to have the skills to address faith issues in different religions. How, though, does Dhillon Keane find a way through for other women who have received the equivalent of the conflicting advice given to Maggie by her priest and by her secular counsellor? “I will quote a survivor of domestic abuse who said, ‘God does not ask us to stay in unsafe spaces.’ And then I support them to look at what that might mean in their situation.”

**WE ARE MEETING** in Vaughan House, a small, anonymous office building that stands in the shadow of Westminster Cathedral and is home to various organisations funded by the diocese. Our room is bare-walled and characterless, but there is an energy and charisma about Dhillon Keane that lights it up.

What links Signs of Hope and Safe in Faith in a practical sense is that both answer needs that otherwise go unanswered. “None of this is based in piety. I don’t think I’d be useful at all if that was my approach. My theology is love and roll up your sleeves. Not wanting to sound like the Beatles, but that is all you need. Just love.”

Nikki Dhillon Keane grew up Catholic in a mixed Greek, English, Italian and Belgian family. “And then my name is Punjabi Indian and Irish. I tell people I’m from all over Europe and north London, and not a lot in between.” She went to St Michael’s Catholic Grammar School in north Finchley before reading English and classical studies in the 1990s at St Mary’s University, Twickenham (where she now teaches a module on domestic violence as part of its Catholic Social Teaching MA course).

While they were both students, her twin

sister supplemented her income by working as a notetaker for a deaf student. “That’s how I met some deaf people and first got interested in sign language. It was my doorway into this remarkable community. It felt to me that, if you knew there were deaf people in the world, why on earth wouldn’t you learn to sign?”

After graduating, she was training as a counsellor when she was injured in a car crash. While recovering, she learnt BSL properly. “By the end of the course, I absolutely knew I had this vocation. The deaf community has a language and a culture that is completely different. It is also a community that has been very oppressed. I can’t tell you how privileged I feel when I am the only hearing person in the room, and they tell me, ‘You don’t count as hearing.’ That is the highest compliment I’ve ever had. What that is saying is, ‘we feel safe with you.’”

Things are getting better, she says. The victory of actress Rose Ayling-Ellis, deaf since birth, in *Strictly Come Dancing* has had a “huge” impact on public attitudes and understanding. “I see deaf people in counselling who report how they are getting a different response now when they are out and about because of Rose.”

But there is still more that needs doing, including in the Church. “Like everything, the Catholic Church is not one thing. The clergy I work with in Safe in Faith have come because they want to learn how to support people suffering domestic violence. And when I speak more widely about the subject to church audiences, I mostly get a very positive response, but sometimes I’ve had clergy saying, ‘You’re splitting up families.’ It’s very rare, but it is still there, and not necessarily from older clergy.”

I retrace our steps to where she described her work in both organisations as a vocation. What exactly does she mean by that? “When you use that word, there is a grandiosity around it, and that is not my experience. I don’t focus on that because I feel that, when

you see something as a vocation or a calling, there is a danger of thinking, ‘I must be doing this all right!’ So Safe in Faith is at every stage a survivor-led project. I am constantly checking what is the best, most helpful, most effective way to do this.” Why use the word at all, then? “I think it is hard to do work like this if it isn’t rooted in some belief system,” she tells me.

**DHILLON KEANE** has the rare gift of appearing upbeat even when talking about the most challenging of issues. “Jolly”, she tells me, was the adjective used of her by some seminarians when she met them recently. Yet, she confesses, she also carries a lot of anger. “I am seeing so much injustice all the time, but anger fuels my work and my activism – as well as green tea! And I am also relentlessly positive. If we are lucky, we get to be instruments of change.”

And she has certainly been that. As well as the two services she set up and continues to run in Westminster (and would love to see extended to other dioceses), she heads the CSAN (Catholic Social Action Network) domestic abuse alliance, advises the Bishops’ Conference of England and

Wales on domestic violence, co-founded the interfaith Faith and Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition and acted as an adviser to the Home Office on the Domestic Abuse Act of 2021. She worked to create statutory guidance underpinning the legislation that includes a section on spiritual abuse.

It has been a remarkable quarter-century of achievement. If I could grant her a Christmas wish, what would it be? She is not one to duck a challenge. “If everyone of us learnt sign language, then deafness would not be disabling because the thing that is really disabling is not being able to communicate with people. The barriers that come with being deaf come because we live in a world that is hearing-centred.”

[caritaswestminster.org.uk/deaf-service-signs-of-hope.php](http://caritaswestminster.org.uk/deaf-service-signs-of-hope.php); [safeinfaith.org.uk](http://safeinfaith.org.uk)

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