

BILL HARRIS AND THE WEEK WITHOUT VIOLENCE



In Australia every week one in six children is bullied, every day a person is murdered, every hour someone reports a sexual assault while many more suffer in silence. Every minute you spend thinking there is nothing you can do - is another minute nothing is done.

Bill Harris is a Deacon in the Uniting Church in South Australia and has been actively involved in community action and development through his ministry. His involvement in the '*Week Without Violence*' initiative points to the way in which partnership with others in the community can bring about more effective and coordinated approaches to overcoming violence in the community. Something can be done, especially together.

Overcoming violence – a prophetic vocation



As a deacon, Bill's role is particularly focussed on enabling others to share in healing the hurts of the world, as the badge given to deacons at their ordination highlights (see logo left): a towel flows from the cross of Christ into the bowl, a symbol of Jesus' call for us to wash each other's feet as a sign of service to each other. Such service is more than care for others, but involves a prophetic witness, as demonstrated in Bill's commitment to the work of the *Decade to Overcome Violence*. Indeed, Uniting Church deacons have talked about new symbols, of the possibility of leaving the towel and bowl with the whole church, where they belong, and moving on to new symbols such as a potted plant breaking free of its confines, representing the deacons' role in helping the church to break out of its existing structures. In the same way the call to speak and act out the truth about violence – *transcending the 'logic' and spirit of violence* – is a prophetic vocation for our times. Crucially also, it is a calling which can only be truly fulfilled by *all* sections of the community working together.

Onkaparinga Collaborative Approach to the Prevention of Domestic Violence

Joint action on overcoming violence is certainly at the heart of the *Onkaparinga Collaborative Approach to the Prevention of Domestic Violence (OCA)*. Since 2001, this has sought to promote a coordinated regional approach to the prevention of domestic and Indigenous family violence in the outer Southern region of Adelaide and its surrounds, involving the broad community, senior management and grass roots workers in human services agencies. It adopted the framework and good practice principles outlined in the *World report on Violence and Health* (WHO 2002) and now has an impressive network of organisations working together. Innovative responses have thus included a project entitled 'Creative women out of a box', through which women who have been affected by domestic violence worked with artists and therapists to produce a box telling their story of violence and abuse. It is an inspiring model for others to follow. Bill Harris became involved with the OCA while based at the combined Churches of Christ-Uniting church in Seaford, taking a lead in the *Strengthening Communities* work, and now, at Vermont Uniting Church, he is taking this work into the City of Marion.

SEEDS OF PEACE

The Week Without Violence



A key way into involving people in the Onkaparinga community has been marking the *Week Without Violence*. This is an initiative begun by the YWCA in 1995 in response to increasing levels of violence in society. Today it involves millions of people in more than 100 countries worldwide, each seeking to make their communities safer places to live. The World YWCA *Week Without Violence* takes place in the third week of October each year, and the YWCA WWV website offers practical strategies and contacts for responding to the increasing incidents of violence around us.

Community actions

In recent years, through the work of Bill and others, the *Week Without Violence* has therefore been the focus for some inspiring events within South Australia, raising positive awareness amongst the broader community of the many ways in which the impact of violence and abuse is felt in the home. This has included:

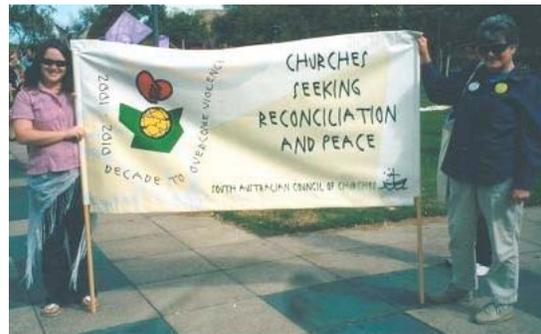
- Schools joining together to prepare posters to decorate stobie poles one week prior to and during the Week and taking part in other art initiatives
- Youth groups making banners to be hung within the region, and Graphic Design students at TAFE producing designs for postcards for wide distribution
- Schools and vacation care centres addressing the issue of violence and reproducing materials in newsletters to parents.
- Many other community organisations actively participating by distributing information or organising their own events with anti-violence themes.

A great deal of media coverage thus results.

Church – community involvement

In addition to involvement in other events, Christians have also taken a particular lead. Twenty Heads of Churches and other faith groups thus signed an Interfaith Declaration to end Domestic Violence and many places of worship incorporate anti-violence messages in their sermons and talks during the Week.

Bill's work in overcoming violence is but one instance of the considerable energies and imagination made by those involved in the *Decade to Overcome Violence* initiative through the **South Australian Council of Churches**, a leading example of the commitment made by State and Territory ecumenical bodies to overcoming violence in the community, offering 'Steps for Peace' for community action in addressing violence.



Sources and more information

YWCA Week Without Violence www.ywca.org.au/week_without_violence.htm

Deacons in the Uniting Church <http://diakonia.uniting.com.au/>

South Australian Council of Churches www.sacc.asn.au

(see especially the DOV and 'Stepping Out for Peace' sections)