



## INSPIRATIONS |



On October 2, 2009, ILERA had the privilege to speak with Rev. Dr. Sally MacNichol during Domestic Violence Awareness month. She is an ordained Interfaith Minister with a Masters of Divinity and PhD in Systematic Theology from Union Theological Seminary. Rev. MacNichol directs the Family Violence Prevention Program at CONNECT. We were motivated to select her as our next INSPIRATIONS feature because of her advocacy, service and passion to help empower communities and promote peace.

**ILERA:** *In your childhood what messages did you get by observing the roles of men and women?*

**Rev. MacNichol:** Men were much more important than women. Women were there to serve men and take care of the social and emotional world. Just watching my mother – she was in charge of children. I came up in a very traditional patriarchal family. My father went to work and when he came home we all scurried around to make sure everything was good for him. My mom got dressed so she would look nice. I brought his slippers over and his jug.

I had three brothers and they definitely got preference as far as I was concerned. They had certain privileges that my sister and I didn't have. I was the oldest in my family. My brother used to say, "You shouldn't be the oldest because you're a girl. Boys are supposed to be the oldest." The men went hunting and fishing. My brothers did those things with my father. We would stay home. My mother didn't go to college because she married my Dad. Even in the times when she had the possibility of going she felt like she needed to stay home, take care of him and make sure everything was going right. I had a very traditional childhood. It made me be a feminist from the time I was very little even though I didn't know what that was.

When I was 12 years old I wanted to be a Page in the Senate. My father was very political and that was the only way I could get him to connect to me. So I became very political and that's all I ever talked to him about. I said, "I'm going to be a Paige in the Senate." I wrote the Senate a letter to do my application. They wrote back and said, "No girls allowed." I was enraged by these things.

**ILERA:** *So what did you learn about power and control?*

**Rev. MacNichol:** I don't see power and control as just something about domestic violence. I understand that is something we all internalize from wherever we are coming from. The air we breathe is about power over something or someone. Power is not bad. We live in a politics of domination. We all ingest that in different ways so we really need to resist that. Power and control in a relationship is nested in Power and Control of the larger world we live in.

**ILERA:** *What is CONNECT and what is its purpose?*

**Rev. MacNichol:** CONNECT is a New York City non profit that is dedicated to eliminating and preventing intimate partner violence, domestic violence, family & gender violence and to create safe families and peaceful communities.

We have about 15 contract agencies we work with in the city. Our "hub" is our Community Empowerment Program. Communities have the power transform themselves. There are communities working to end sexual assault and domestic violence. We just want to support that. I like to call it the midwifery model. Like midwives we offer knowledge, skills and techniques recognizing that those who want to give birth to peaceful families and communities will be giving birth the way they want too. We don't want to impose, just help – be present and provide support and resources. We work with over 150 community based organizations – including faith based organizations - as well as individuals who want address this very difficult issue. CONNECT Faith is part of community empowerment because people want to go to their faith community. This is a spiritual problem as well as a community problem. It goes to the core of people's spirit.

**ILERA:** *What motivated you to start an Interfaith Roundtable on Domestic Violence?*

**Rev. MacNichol:** When we started the Community Empowerment Program, we did 500 street surveys in Queens, the Bronx and Brooklyn. We asked where people would want to go for help with Intimate Violence. More than 85% said they wanted to go to their faith community. People would rather go to their

religious leader than the police. Also people who don't come from other countries want to go to their faith communities. That's where they feel safe. Especially for communities that are veiled, oppressed and don't feel safe going to the police.

Now having said that, the surveys also revealed that religious leaders often didn't help or gave the wrong kind of help. Generally speaking, intimate violence is not named and not on the front burner. Even in liberal, progressive, anti-oppression faith communities the problem with Intimate Violence is not named. Intimate Violence includes Intimate Partner Violence, Child Sexual Abuse, Child Abuse and Sexual Assault. There are issues for some faiths around bodies and sexualities. It is important to remember that the majority of this violence is done by men to women and children and most faith traditions and communities are male dominated.

**ILERA:** *Do you know if there is anything written in sacred religious texts that creates obstacles and barriers for religious leaders to address the Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence that occurs in their communities?*

**Rev. MacNichol:** That's a complicated question because sacred texts say many different things. Oftentimes depending on whose interests are at stake. For example, in the Christian text it says a woman must be submissive to her husband. In the Qur'an there's a verse about how a husband should discipline his wife but to my knowledge there is nothing suggesting how a wife should discipline her husband. It's andocentric. The Qur'an says you should reprimand your wife, explain to her what she did wrong and if she didn't do that right, you should not have sex with her or eat her food. And if that doesn't work you should hit her with a little stick. Almost every sacred text we know contains anti woman statements – Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism surely. The Judeo-Christian creation story has always been used to blame women via Eve. The understanding of women as "less than" and the property of men is one of the deepest obstacles we find in sacred texts.

A lot of the problem is our human fallibility and the way we interpret sacred scriptures. We have to remember that by and large men were the ones working on the scripture, interpreting the scripture and delivering the scripture. And the audience for the scripture was mostly male. Audience is important in how we interpret scripture because interpretation is interactive. There's also a lot of practices people have that aren't related to scripture that people somehow through customs and traditions over many years got embedded and they don't really know why they are there.

We can certainly find other things in sacred texts like "treat all people as your brother and sister" which is in different words across all the sacred texts. Another is "compassion and wisdom are how we should act in the world". I think there is plenty in the sacred texts that says we're all made in the image of God – male and female. I think all religions have a respect for human dignity and a belief in the power of love. People say that in different ways.

**ILERA:** *So is CONNECT Faith and the Interfaith Roundtable part of the resistance?*

**Rev. MacNichol:** That's how I see it. CONNECT Faith is there to support people who are resisting violence and helping people heal but also prevent the violence, abuse, indignity and dehumanization in their communities. In the past couple of years, a number of independent women's ministries addressing intimate abuse have grown up around the city. Most are outside the institutional church and women are starting them because they need safe spiritual faith based places for women to find safety and healing.

We live in a rape culture. That is an injustice to everybody! So why is this not a justice issue? Justice is a theme in many religions. That's another resource we have in our religions. We have the tendency to see private family issues outside of justice. Human Rights Laws say everyone has a right to "this" and a right to "that" but they don't necessarily focus on a child inside of a family that is getting abused.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops have put together an excellent letter on domestic violence but most priests don't even know it exists. A faith based organizing project put together a meeting about Catholic social teachings on domestic violence and hoped that some priests would attend. But it was domestic violence advocates who attended. They were concerned about the women they worked with and how their religious ideas were a barrier to their safety. One of the questions they had was, "What am I going to say to the woman who says, the priest says I have to go back?" Or what if she says, "I took a vow and marriage is sacred and I can't break it. I am praying for my husband to change and God is going to answer my prayer." These were some of the advocates concerns because this is how women were trying to keep safe. The way these women keep safe and think about their lives, marriage and children is informed by their religious, theological worldview. But no one is talking about that. That's why we

have the Interfaith Roundtable. We have to really look at what in our religion is supporting violence, peace and non-violence.

**ILERA:** *More people and institutions have become aware of the need to address domestic violence. Do you have any thoughts as to why there is still hesitancy addressing sexual abuse when it often intersects with domestic violence?*

**Rev. MacNichol:** Sexual Abuse is part of Intimate Partner Violence. When we work with preventive programs we always include that. But because it's the most intimate and there is so much shame around sexuality people just don't go there. If you are my worker I might tell you that he burned me, he's trying to control me from going places and he's taking my paycheck. I'm probably not going to tell you that he rapes me every night - especially if you don't want to hear it. If we build a rapport and you as my worker tell me, "We consider all these things a part of violence. Many people experience humiliation and sexual abuse." Then I can relate to you and disclose knowing you're not going to judge me and make me feel more ashamed or say I probably asked for it.

**ILERA:** *What do you think would help agencies and faith based communities address sexual abuse?*

**Rev. MacNichol:** I think we need to put it out there more, let people know that no one has a right to coerce another person to do anything with their body they don't want to do. At one of our trainings a woman from a Nigerian Christian community told us she attended a wedding where the woman's vows included her saying that she vowed to give her body to her husband whenever he wanted it! And this was not part of his vows. So in a root cause way we must address: women as property, the woman blaming and shaming, and the sexualization and objectification of women in faith communities.

The sexualization of women of women in faith communities is huge. If a woman has to cover herself from head to toe because it's going to distract a man from praying right, that's sexualization of women. If you can't preach or teach in the Christian church because its going to distract men, that's because women are seen as sexual objects. Until we start talking about this it's going to be hard to make progress. In the meantime, I think we need to put it out on the table more. I went to a church where they showed the movie NO! [A documentary on rape and sexual assault in the African American community]. It was really powerful but I don't know what the church has done since then. That's one of my concerns - ongoing training is needed. This is why CONNECT likes to partner with community and faith based organizations for the long haul.

**Rev. MacNichol:** Because today is Gandhi's birthday, I really feel that to transform all of this abuse into peace we have to make a commitment to non-violence. We have to hold people accountable in a loving way, not a punitive way. We need to look at our theological and spiritual worldviews and see where we are into punishment and judgment – which leads to violence. Judgment is spiritual error.

Gandhi said that making anybody feel less than is violent. So I think we have to make that commitment. That's what we need to look at in our sacred texts because all sacred texts talk about peace. How are we going to get there? And do we believe that we can be peaceful and live in a world without violating other people? We have to integrate non-violence in our thoughts and our hearts too.

**Rev. Sally MacNichol, PhD is Director of Programs at CONNECT NY. It is a New York City non-profit agency committed to the prevention and elimination of family and gender violence and the creation of safe families and peaceful communities. Rev. MacNichol can be reached through CONNECT NY's website at [www.connectnyc.org](http://www.connectnyc.org).**

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