

## RELIGION EXPERTS COLUMN

*Below is my response to the question provided for the Ask The Religion Experts feature in this Sunday's Ottawa Citizen. We hope this will generate thoughtful discussion of real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

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Sunday, May 20, 2012

**Q** : How do you handle cases of domestic abuse that come to your attention?

**A** : Within this neutralizing phrase - domestic abuse - are different forms of cruel and violent actions. These include physical and sexual assaults by partners in dating and marriage relationships, offences against children, including physical, sexual and neglect, and exploitation and physical assaults against at risk and older adults, often in situations of dependency and vulnerability. The list is too long to represent. Thankfully, in my clerical role, as a leader of a spiritual community it is a rarity. As a clinical social worker with decades of experience, these are a regular occurrence in my professional practice. And it is far more often in that professional role where I am aware of a religious dimension to the abuse.

Whether as a priest or health worker or ordinary citizen, I am obliged by law to report any situations where a child is at risk of harm to the appropriate investigative authorities. Sadly we, as a society, have very few mandatory obligations to report where others are involved, such as seniors or those with developmental or severe mental health conditions. This often leaves us in positions of trust and confidence with limited powers to intervene beyond counselling and advice.

Only a few in a clerical position even have authority to impose congregational sanctions against an individual. I recently was aware of such a situation where a husband was banned

from his church by the minister because of his behaviour towards his wife and other congregants. I am aware of individuals who are held away from their congregation, 'on probation' as it were, with the requirement to address their behaviour before being allowed to participate again. As I wrote here recently, our positions as religious leaders are paradoxical because we must on the one hand model and uphold the highest moral standards, while, on the other, we must remember our commitments to care for the inner lives of those in our congregations, including those who may be perpetrators of abuse. There is not always a single clear issue and we must rely on our faith principles, personal conscience, congregational advice and awareness of the broader social and legal context to find a path through each situation.

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:: om namu amida butsu::*

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