

Conversations shed light on gender issues

The South African Faith and Family Institute (SAFFI) in partnership with the Commission on Gender Equality and the Mitchell's Plain Care Centre hosted two conversations with the Reverend Dr Sharon Ellis Davis and her husband, Reverend Dr Edward Davis, African American pastors and theologians in the United Church of Christ from Chicago, Illinois.

These community-based dialogues allowed for South African and African American reflections on how faith communities address issues of gender-based violence and women empowerment.

SAFFI, a multi-faith non-profit organisation, recognises that religion and faith plays an integral part both in the continuation of violence against women and in its eradication.

It seeks to address faith issues and root causes of gender-based violence.

Through its endeavours, SAFFI seeks to be a resource to religious leaders and faith communities; and encourages that places of worship become sanctuaries of hope and healing to individuals and families who experience sexual and domestic violence.

Elizabeth Petersen, a social worker and founder of SAFFI, said: "Faith communities must collaborate with government and gender-based anti-violence NGOs to expand safety options for abused women in our communities. Our faith communities are uniquely placed to hold perpetrators accountable and offer support to victims and survivors."

On Wednesday July 20, about 25 religious leaders gathered at the Mitchell's Plain Care Centre in Tafelsig to discuss challenges, hopes and achievements experienced by Christian and Muslim clergy



■ Pictured seated, from left are, Reverend Dr Sharon Ellis Davis, Nomthandaz Kalati and Maureen Sables.

Standing, from left are, Jenni Arendorf, Director of Place of Hope; Elizabeth Petersen of SAFFI; Leonard Macakati from the Commission on Gender Equality; Joy Lange from St Anne's Homes; Thozama Diamond from the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform; and Veronica Mitchell. They were part of a conversation on God and gender issues.

and faith communities in addressing domestic violence.

Representatives from the Muslim Judicial Council, Assembly of God Association, Islamic Relief, Western Cape Christian Ministers' Forum and Bishop Lavis Religious Leaders Forum, Caleb, Isango Institute deliberated on the scourge of violence and the devastating impact it has on families. Some of the key reflections and recommendations from the conversation include:

- South African black, coloured and African American abused women of faith share the same dilemma of often being disappointed by their faith communities' silence and inaction when approached for help.

We learnt that most women of faith will not go to secular service providers because

their faith issues are not understood.

- Religious leaders acknowledged the vital role they play and articulated the urgent need for domestic violence training.

They also expressed their willingness to collaborate with government and NGOs to help victims, survivors and offenders.

Those at the gathering learnt of the promising work done by faith-based initiatives such as the Bishop Lavis Religious Leaders Forum who are collaborating with SAFFI and various government departments including department of Health, Justice, SAPS, CPF and others to address various social evils including domestic violence in their community.

On Thursday July 21, 10 women leaders in the faith sector continued the conversa-

tion with Reverend Dr Sharon Ellis Davis and focused on the quest for gender equality and women's empowerment in their faith communities.

Dr Davis reminded them that gender is a social construct which can be de-constructed and reconstructed.

"This continues to be the work that black and coloured South Africans and African Americans have to do if we are going to find resolve in our unique identities and if we are going to find solutions to how institutional oppression and violence impact on our quest for healing and empowerment," said Dr Davis.

Ms Petersen reiterated the need to unpack concepts such as patriarchy – the system of male authority that makes the oppression of women seems natural. Unpacking concepts such as oppression, slavery, apartheid and its intersection with violence against women, created the opportunity for women to open up about their journeys of breaking through the multi-layers of oppression to step into leadership.

One participant explained the complexity of her struggle and said: "My husband was a leader in the church and the pastor knew about our problem. I experienced all the forms of abuse. I was afraid of him. I was always busy in the church activities – like Martha in the Bible. He took my children away from me. They didn't understand why I let them go with their father. I really didn't want to get an interdict because of my faith, but my life was in constant danger and I had to get protection. The church did not help me. I had to go against my belief and get an interdict because God wants us to love each other not to abuse each other."

Some women said they had to leave their faith communities in order to break out of the perpetual oppressive behaviour of leaders within their faith communities in order to serve God's purpose for their lives.

None of these women wanted to leave their churches. They wanted to be recognised as leaders and not relinquish the calling to do God's work because of a need to preserve the status quo.

Those women who courageously stepped out of the repressive faith communities still find it challenging to be received as equal partners by some of the most "liberal" faith leaders.

The quest to respond to God's call upon your life as a woman remains a challenge.

"The need to continue with conversations like these that break the silence and provide support to women leaders in the faith sector is vital," said one of the participants.

SAFFI, a catalyst in bringing together faith communities, government, gender-based violence organisations, will continue to organise various conversations as part of their commitment to the 365 Days Campaign.

"We are very intentional about taking these conversations and trainings into community-based organisations thus providing opportunity for religious leaders to see and meet domestic violence service providers. In this way trust relationships are built between these crucial stakeholders in the lives of victims, survivors and offenders.

"Hopefully, new partnerships are formed and safety options for abused women can be expanded," said Ms Petersen.

SAFFI was officially launched during the 16 Days of Activism Campaign in 2010 and welcomes financial donations to take its work into every corner of society.

Requests for educational talks, workshops, training and technical support can be directed to Elizabeth Petersen or to make a donation email elizabeth@saffi.org.za or call 082 475 5116 or 462 2277.

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