

# What Pastors Can Do To Help Victims of Domestic Violence in the Church

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It was 10 P.M. and Kirstin was sitting at the kitchen table overwhelmed with pain and fear. Every bone in her body ached. Her arms were bruised and one eye was almost swollen shut. Her husband, Tim, had just stormed off in the only family car after another one of the “family squabbles,” as he called them.

Feeling hopeless and trapped, with no idea of what to do, Kirstin reached to pick up the phone with the intent of calling the pastor of the church she sometimes attended.

Imagine that you were Kristin’s pastor. What would you do? The chances are very good that there is one or more families in your church where domestic violence is shattering lives. Domestic violence is one of the secret tragedies occurring within the church.

Consider the following facts. Persons killing their spouses account for 15-20 percent of all murders committed in the United States. The FBI estimates that a wife is beaten every 15-30 seconds in this country. Two to four million women are abused each year and 4,000 of them are killed.

Domestic violence is an epidemic problem. Nearly one-third of American women report they have been abused by a husband or boyfriend. In 2001, the U.S. Department of Justice found that more than half a million American women were victims of nonfatal domestic violence. Each year, as many as 324,000 women experience domestic violence during their pregnancy.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, domestic violence or spouse abuse appears to take an equally damaging toll within the general church community.

A national survey completed several years ago by the Seattle Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, found that typical parish clergy see almost 14 people each year who come to them with problems involving family violence.

One national denomination polled a sample of its membership and found that 68 percent of those questioned had personally experienced some type of family violence, including spouse abuse.

Unfortunately, there are thousands of desperate souls whose anguish can be described by the words of David from the 55<sup>th</sup> Psalm -“*My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.*”

While the vast majority of victims are women, there is some evidence men are also abused. One study estimated approximately 3.5 million women and 250,000 men are battered by their spouse

or intimate partner. However, because of the preponderance of abused women, this article will be limited to a discussion of women victims.

### **What Is Domestic Violence?**

Domestic violence refers to actual or threatened harm. *Physical* violence includes any act or behavior that inflicts bodily harm or is intended to inflict physical harm such as kicking, hitting, shoving, choking, throwing objects, or use of a weapon.

*Emotional* abuse may include ridiculing or demeaning statements, withholding affection or privileges, and blaming the spouse for family or interpersonal problems.

*Threatened violence* is a type of emotional abuse. It can include verbal threats to harm, the wielding of weapons, threatening gestures, injury or killing of family pets, destruction of property, or any other intimidating verbal or nonverbal behavior.

### **Phases of Violence**

There is a predictable progression of events that seems to repeat itself again and again in an abusive relationship. The first phase is a time of *tension building*. Irritations over such things as discipline and finances lead to a feeling of “walking on egg shells.” Regardless of the wife’s efforts to avoid confrontations, the crisis phase is inevitable.

The second phase starts when the acute *violence begins*. This is when the batterer unleashes his aggressive behavior upon his wife. The abuse can be verbal or physical, but there is always a victim, and there is always pain.

After the explosive release of violence there follows a period of relative calm. This is the *remorse phase*. Like a penitent alcoholic, the abusive husband may express guilt, show kindness and remorse, and shower his partner with gifts and promises that it will never happen again. This behavior often comes from a genuine sense of guilt over the harm inflicted, as well as the fear of losing his spouse. The husband/boyfriend may really believe he will never allow himself to be violent again. The wife wants very much to believe her husband, and for a time, may renew her hope in his ability to change. The problem is that the cycle will repeat itself unless some kind of outside intervention takes place.

### **How the Pastor Can Help**

As a pastor you may often be in the forefront of identifying a domestic violence episode and in helping a family in severe need of support and intervention.

Important goals for your involvement should include: safety for the woman and children in the family; accountability and treatment for the abuser; and restoration of both the victim and abuser, and hopefully, reconciliation of the relationship.

Often your first contact may be with the wife who is being abused. If you observe the woman wearing long sleeves in the summer, sunglasses indoors, withdrawal from social situation, unexplained injuries, signs of stress, and alcohol or drug use, these may be signs of abuse. Chronic low self-esteem, a need to rescue or cover the mistakes of her husband, social isolation and emotional and economic dependency, are often seen in women who are battered.

To assist in taking inventory of a situation, you could have the wife respond to the following questions about her husband's behavior.

- Does he continually monitor your time and make you account for every minute (when you run errands, visit friends, commute to work, etc.)?
- Do you ever feel isolated and alone, as if there were nobody with whom you could confide?
- Is he overly critical of daily things, such as your cooking, your clothes, or your appearance?
- Do his moods change radically, from very calm to very angry, or vice versa?
- Does he ever strike you with his hands or feet (slap, punch, kick, etc.), or with an object?
- Has he ever threatened you with an object or weapon?
- Does he ever give you visible injuries (such as welts, bruises, cuts, lumps on head)?
- Have you ever had to seek professional aid for any injury at a medical clinic, doctor's office, or hospital emergency room?
- Does he ever hurt you sexually or make you have intercourse against your will?
- Does he become abusive with his language, calling you names, conveying insults, or making threats?

If the wife answers "yes" to more than a couple of these questions, she may be living in an abusive situation.

The violence is not going to go away by itself, even if she and her husband claim to be Christians. Talk to the wife about taking action for her own safety and perhaps the welfare of her children. After the safety procedures are implemented, more consideration can be given to restoration.

Following are some suggestions for pastors as you begin the process of understanding, guiding and helping protect a potential victim.

### **What to Do for a Suspected Victim of Domestic Violence?**

Most victims of spouse abuse feel totally helpless and have no idea where to begin. The following approach is suggested:

- Listen to the victim, stand with her and believe what she is reporting.
- Reassure her that the abuse is not her fault. She is not to blame. What the abuser has done is wrong, even illegal. Assure her of God's love and that God doesn't want her to remain in a situation where her life and the lives of the children are in danger.
- Be trustworthy and calm. The victim needs reassurance, support and hope, but don't pressure her to talk about the abuse.

- Let her know that it is likely that, in spite of his promises, the violence will continue and, probably escalate.
- Make sure she knows that she's not alone—that millions of American women from every ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic group suffer from abuse, and that many women find it difficult to leave.
- Also explain that domestic violence is a crime - as much of a crime as robbery or rape and that she can seek protection from the justice system.
- Be concerned about her injuries—does she need or has she gotten medical attention?
- Be patient in listening and allowing the victim the time to process her story.
- Respect her need for confidentiality. Don't put her name on a prayer list, or give information to elders or other church leaders.
- Help the victim take inventory of the situation. Assess the level of harm and danger to herself or the children.
- Give her the time. She needs to make her own decisions. If she is not ready to make major changes in her life, do not take away your support.
- Become educated about local resources, magistrate numbers, support groups, counseling, shelter program, and legal advocacy services. (The National Domestic Violence Hotline is 800-799-7233.)
- Make safety a priority. Help her develop a safety plan with her welfare in mind.
- Help the victim decide when and how to implement the plan. If she is planning to leave, remind her to take important papers with her, such as birth certificates, passports, health insurance documents, etc.
- Suggest that her husband needs treatment. He needs to take responsibility for, and change, his behavior.
- Pressing charges may be very appropriate. Domestic violence is a crime, and a record may be helpful in the future to hold him accountable for his behavior. Some research has shown that being arrested can have beneficial long-term effects. Men who have been arrested are less likely to beat their wives again. Help the victim realize that once she makes the call, she should be prepared to follow through on signing a warrant or whatever else may be required. Calling the police may not be a long term solution unless it leads to the batterer getting help. If there is a high likelihood of danger, the police should definitely be called.
- Continue in prayer. It should be a high priority regardless of what else you do. Ask God for direction in what type of intervention to pursue. God admonishes us to pray, (Matthew 21:22).
- Once she is safe, help her begin thinking about long-term alternatives.

Following is a short list of things a pastor should not do while working with a victim of domestic violence.

### **Don't**

- Tell her what to do, when to leave, or not to leave.
- Tell her to go back and try a little harder, to be more submissive, or to give the husband what he wants.
- Tell her she should stay because of the children.
- Blame her in any way for the violence. Emphasize that the abuser is totally responsible for his anger and acting out regardless of the frustrations he faced.
- Rescue her by trying to make decisions for her.
- Offer to try to talk to her husband or boyfriend to straighten things out.
- Tell her she is wrong for wanting to stay with her husband.

- Recommend marriage counseling or any marriage enrichment seminars until or unless the husband has completed his own treatment.

Remember, no one deserves to be beaten or threatened. There is no excuse for abusive behavior and it is not part of any suffering for Christ. Violence at home will not just go away, but if you help the victim take action and reach out for help, it can be stopped.

A comprehensive perspective for ministry to those experiencing domestic violence would be to:

- (1) Make clear pronouncements from the pulpit about the evil and harmful consequences of violence in the home.

- (2) Establish policy and procedures to protect victims and to minister to their practical needs, as well as to offer healing for their emotional and spiritual needs.

- (3) Take clear steps to make sure the abuser is held accountable for his actions, often in cooperation with the legal system, in the process of restoring the person and assisting them in developing new patterns of behavior.

As a pastor, you can be a significant instrument of God to bring accountability and grace into a traumatized family. You can affirm to the victim and to the abuser that God can heal the broken hearted. This includes the entire family. It includes the victim who struggles with hopelessness. It includes the perpetrator who carries insecurity and shame, as well as the children who are preoccupied with fear and apprehension. And it includes the church family who has experienced shock and disbelief. God, through Jesus Christ can bring reconciling love, mercy, grace, forgiveness and justice to all those concerned.

## Reference

1. Family Violence Prevention Fund, *Domestic Violence is a Serious, Widespread Social Problem in America: The Facts*. Retrieved April 16, 2005 from <http://endabuse.org/resources/facts>.

## Author Bio

Dr. Grant L. Martin is a licensed psychologist in private practice in Edmonds, Washington. His books on domestic violence include *Counseling for Family Violence and Abuse*, (Word, 1987) and *Please Don't Hurt Me*, (Victor Books, 1987).

Dr. Martin devotes most of his current practice to the special needs of children. His specialty includes the identification and treatment of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, learning problems, and related issues. His other books include *Help! For Teachers: Strategies for Reaching All Students*, (Purposeful Design, 2004) and *The Attention Deficit Child*, (Victor, 1998)

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## Side Bar

### Pastoral Responses to the Abuser

- Be very clear that the violent behavior is unacceptable.
- Work with him on his spiritual understanding and personal growth, and make it very clear that there is nothing in Scriptures to justify abusive behavior.
- In dealing with him, be very careful to protect the safety of the victim.
- Do not accept his rationalizations or his blaming of the victim.
- Offer him hope that he can change. Tell him about group treatment or other counseling options in your community.
- Hold him accountable. In order to change he must take responsibility for his actions. If he is serious about changing, he will seek out the help he needs. Pastoral counseling does not substitute for a formal treatment program.
- Do not take his word that the violence has stopped. Check with his abused partner without him being present.
- Do not encourage marital counseling until it is clear that the violence has stopped.
- Avoid premature forgiveness and blind hope that everything will get better.
- Find ways to collaborate with community agencies and law enforcement to hold him accountable.

### **The following books are recommended for pastors who wish to learn more about domestic violence.**

- Kroeger, Catherine, Nason-Clark, Nancy, *No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence*, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001.
- Miles, Al, *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publications, 2000.
- Murphy, Nancy, *God's Reconciling Love: A Pastor's Handbook On Domestic Violence*, Seattle: FaithTrust Institute, 2003.