

# Top Ten Questions to Clergy

Over the last 15 years, we have interviewed hundreds of religious leaders concerning domestic violence. Here is what some have had to say about the reality of abuse in their ministries.

## Are you Serious?

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Here is my **top ten check-list** for considering whether or not a congregation or religious leader is serious about the issue of abuse. As a pastor, let me ask you these questions?

**1. Do you offer a listening ear?** *Over the last 15 years, my research program has tried to understand what happens when an abused religious victim looks to a faith community for help in the aftermath of crisis. Without a doubt, one of the single most important ingredients in assisting a woman or man who has been violated is the offer of a listening ear. To be blunt, these are people whose ears are bigger than their mouths. To be a listening ear takes patience, empathy and genuine concern. You don't need specialized university training to listen to someone in pain.*

**2. Does your church washroom offer information about abuse?**

*One of the safest places to put a brochure, a shoecard, or a sticker for the emergency battered women's shelter is on the door of each stall in the women's washroom inside your church. Here a woman can read in privacy, take what information is safe for her to put in her shoe, or place in her purse, and then at the moment when she needs help or shelter, it is just a phone call away. Providing information on a table in the church foyer compromises confidentiality and may place a woman at greater risk for future harm.*

**3. Does your congregation, or ministry groups within it, partner with the local transition house?**

*Building bridges between the steeple and the shelter is of utmost importance. When the pathway is well trodden, this means that a worker at the shelter can call a pastor or other religious leader when there is a woman in their house who would like to talk to someone about her spiritual angst. It also means that when an abused woman in the congregation looks to her pastor for help, that pastor can encourage her to seek refuge there at any time when her safety or that of her children is in danger.*

**4. Is violence ever discussed in your church youth group?**

*Abuse happens at every stage of the life course. And it is extremely important that we recognize that many young women eventually marry young men who abused them while dating. Sadly, many religious parents underestimate the prevalence and severity of controlling and abusive behaviour amongst teens and emerging adults. We need to get the message out loudly and clearly: an abusive relationship is wrong; it is never part of God's design for healthy living.*

**5. Do you make appropriate referrals to the resources in your community?**

*For congregations and pastors to partner effectively with community resources they must know what is available, have developed links within the community, and have learned to respect the skills and knowledge of others. But they must also recognize their own limits and be willing to learn from those who have had experience responding to abuse victims and their families. Every pastor should learn the art of referring. Collaboration with the resources of the community enhances the credibility of the church even as it provides safety and help to victims in need.*

**6. Is violence discussed in your pre-marital counseling?**

*When the marriage train is about to leave the station, you have a very captive audience. As a religious leader, use that opportunity wisely. One important message to offer a couple at this critical time: never use violence! Point out that peace and safety—cloaked in love—are to be the cardinal features of a Christian home. Make it clear that if abuse happens in the future, the church is a place of refuge and the pastor's office a confidential location to disclose the pain of violence in an intimate relationship.*

**7. Do you realize the importance of spiritual resources for victims of abuse?**

*When believers have been battered by a loved one, they often experience a flood of questions about their spiritual life. Why has God abandoned me? Do I need to keep on forgiving a man who hurts and threatens us? What does God expect of me? Can I believe the tears and remorse of my violent partner? Pastors are uniquely situated to bring the "healing balm of Gilead" to the hurting. It can often be very helpful to read a Bible passage offering comfort, or to hear the story of Joseph, or Hagar retold by a caring pastor. Others will especially appreciate prayers that recognize their hurt and betrayal while call upon God to offer empowerment and strength.*

**8. Do you share the load amongst the flock?**

*We learn to care by being cared for. None of us is so strong that we do not require the help and care of others. None of us is so weak that we have nothing to offer those who are hurting. The sheep need each other—if they are to flourish and grow. As shepherd of the local congregation, it is important to help men and women learn how to care for each other under the umbrella of God's love and provision. It would be ridiculous for the pastor to do all the caring. It would rob ordinary men and women of God of the opportunity to help each other. We must learn how to care and it is the responsibility of religious leaders to assist their congregations in doing just that.*

**9. Do you offer ministry opportunities to those who have received the care and counsel of the church?**

*In time, and with appropriate training and guidance, those who have been helped need opportunities to give back to others what they have received. A woman who was battered can indeed walk along side another woman who is suffering. Support groups are very important, particularly for victims of abuse. Friendship and support go hand in hand. We all need ways that we can reach out to others.*

**10. Do you hold violent, controlling men accountable for their actions?**

*When religious leaders condemn violence from the pulpit, they honour the Scriptures and family life. When pastors counsel battered women to seek refuge in a shelter when they are afraid, they save lives. When clergy advise a couple to reunite quickly after an incident of violence and then*

*remorse, they place in jeopardy a woman's life and the possibility that a relationship could be transformed. Holding men accountable for their violent, controlling behaviour is one of the unique roles that clergy can fulfil in a coordinated community response to domestic violence. Holding them accountable may include encouraging attendance at a batterers intervention program or sustained contact with a therapeutic agency skilled in issues of DV.*

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