

# Domestic Violence: The Response of the Church

By: Rev. Miriam Mollering

She sang in the choir, worked in children's ministry and was a faithful member of the prayer team. Her husband also sang in the choir, was involved in men's ministry and was a well-liked gentleman. They were a middle class family and strong financial supporters of the church. On the surface they appeared to be a highly functional Christian family.

I can still remember the day I met her over 25 years ago. The lady was crying uncontrollably. Her body was bruised. Her wrists were red from the ropes her husband had used to tie her to the bed. Her story sounded like something out of a Hollywood movie - not of a respected church family. Sadly, the pastor dismissed the allegations, concluding that this was just an emotional woman who was not credible. And, he inferred that she must have done something to incite her husband's anger against her. If she had submitted to his authority, this never would have happened.

This was not only an irresponsible and unconscionable response, but it was also a misrepresentation of scripture and the heart of God. God does not sanction abuse or the dehumanization of His creation. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are to respect and honor people.

[Romans 12:10](#) Be devoted to one another and put the interest of the other person above our interest.

[Philip. 2:3](#) Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

[1 Peter 2:17](#) Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

The Rev. Becky Robbins-Penniman, speaking at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church of Southern Ohio, said: "**No faithful interpretation of scripture can tolerate or even condone domestic violence.**"

Listen to the words of Ephesians 5:28-29: "Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body."

This instruction to husbands is very clear and specific. A husband is to nourish and cherish his own body and that of his wife. Domestic violence which occurs between spouses is probably the most blatant violation of this teaching. Such abuse is a reflection of the self-hatred (hates his own flesh) in the one who is abusive.

Domestic violence is about **power and control**. It is a problem of epidemic proportions. On average, more than three women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends in North America every day.

In 2000, 1,247 women were killed by an intimate partner. The same year, 440 men were killed by an intimate partner, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. (Information from The **Oregon Social Learning Center**.) No matter the statistic, one victim, whether male or female, young or old, is still one too many.

The silence must be broken. Pastors, leaders and people in the faith community must recognize the reality that domestic violence *is* happening in our congregations. We must not endorse abuse through our silence, lack of knowledge or behind a misinterpretation of scripture.

There are many in the faith community who do respond with caring compassion and do engage in a collaborative approach for the purpose of helping those who are victims of domestic violence. And, there are service providers who are excellent at working with the faith community recognizing that faith may be an integral part of the victim's values and beliefs.

The role of the clergy is different from the role of the shelter worker; however, as we team together, we can work toward solutions that are in the best interest of the victim. That is why communication and cooperation are essential for the sake of the victim. Clergy need to play to their strengths in terms of providing spiritual care and permit social agencies to do the same. Our common interest is the safety and welfare of the victim. This is not a time for any other agenda.

If we are truly committed to helping victims of domestic violence, then the **church must engage in a collaborative effort and resource the community and professionals who are trained to respond to specific concerns of the victim.** None of us have all the answers nor can we meet all the needs. However, **combined resources** provide a balanced approach which deals with specific external, physical, and emotional needs while addressing the larger religious and philosophical issues.

A report produced by Statistics Canada: **Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2003**, said:

“While shelters are one source of help for abused women, they cannot serve all those that come to their door.” “Shelters also rely on other agencies within the community, often working together in multi-agency co-ordination committees, to provide services to their residents.”

That too *must be* part of the DNA of our churches, to work together to break the cycle of violence, treating the victim with dignity and respect as she endeavors to restructure her life.

### **The many faces of domestic violence**

- Abuse involves denigrating the value of the spouse, either physically, verbally or with body language, social isolation, economic marginalization, and rape and other sexual violations.
- Accusing the spouse of activities, sins and behavior that are untrue. This erodes trust, confidence and self value and leads to a dysfunctional and unsafe relationship.
- Verbal abuse through guilt trips, faultfinding, name-calling, yelling, sarcasm, blaming and put-downs. (We need to take seriously the power of the tongue to assault and its ability to devastate.)
- Physical abuse with a hand or an object.
- Spiritual abuse takes place when one person uses the Bible or his or her spiritual or religious beliefs to control, manipulate and/or justify his/her abusive behavior.
  1. an understanding of what constitutes domestic violence and abuse;
  2. have an understanding of why people abuse;
  3. recognize the emotional, physical and spiritual impact on victims and their families;
  4. be committed to collaborating with and working with service providers, mental health, police, community resources and shelters;
  5. know how to provide spiritual and professional help, hope and healing through the Word of God;

6. be committed to breaking the silence by reporting domestic violence; and by not allowing the cries of victims to be silenced and swept under the clerical carpet;
7. educate our congregations. For example, in our premarriage seminars we address issues such as domestic violence and the devastation of pornography on the marriage relationship. Educating couples before they get married is a preventative measure. **Break the cycle before it begins.** Also, there have been times when I, as a pastor, have advised a couple not to get married until they resolve glaring conflictual issues or when abuse is already present.
8. **Take seriously what the alleged victim is telling you.** Don't minimize her/his injuries or the intent of the partner with a statement such as "I'm sure he did not mean to hurt you." Such a comment reinforces a victim's sense of helplessness, and minimizes the horror of his/her situation.
9. **Build a rapport with the community resources that work in the area of domestic violence, and** commit to working with them to provide the best possible care for the victim.
10. **If the danger is imminent or there is one incident or a history of domestic violence, encourage the person to call the police.** Or, you may need to intervene and call the police. Also, inform the victim in **every** situation where a child's well-being is at risk or a child has already been traumatized and abused, that there is a legal obligation to report suspected and/or actual cases of child abuse.
11. **If she/he is injured or has bruises, encourage the individual to see her/his family doctor or go to hospital emergency so that the injuries can be treated and documented by a professional.** Also, **never** give out information about the victim's whereabouts to a spouse or family members without the full consent of the victim.
12. **Plan ahead. Be proactive, not reactive.** Prepare policies, procedures and a suggested safety plan for victims. Have a list of resources available that would help you and your staff respond to domestic violence.
13. **Prayer.** A victim is often left feeling hopeless and helpless. Prayer can be comforting and reassuring. **Caution:** Do not, however, offer or suggest prayer as **the only** answer. And, never blame the victim for the abuse by suggesting that if she just submitted to his authority, then he would not get angry. Men and women must be responsible for their behavior and not hide behind irresponsible theology and misinterpreted scripture.
  - inability to establish lasting, quality relationships
  - hostility, low self-esteem, misdirected anger
  - isolation
  - distrust of authority figures
  - withdrawal from people
  - sexual dysfunction, fear of intimacy, gender identity confusion, distorted or impaired desire, various phobias or flashbacks and pain during intimacy without a physical cause
  - difficulty differentiating between appropriate and inappropriate intimacy
  - families are divided and the family unit destroyed
  - children may suffer physical and/or emotional injury

- financial struggles
- loss of community ... an individual may have to leave her/his church family or move to another city or province in order to protect his/her safety
- Domestic Violence Safety Plan checklist
- Checklist for determining domestic violence. Engaging the victim in doing some self-assessment gives the person a sense of regaining some control in dealing with the issue. The list becomes a mirror as to what is happening in the person's heart and soul.
- Pastoral Care and Support Community Resource Guide
- Resource Guide from the Action Committee Against Violence
- Booklets on: **When Violence Comes Home** and **When Words Hurt**
- **Do not advise the victim to return to a violent relationship. If the abuser promises to change, do not assume that these promises will be kept.**
- *break the silence*
- *listen without blaming and shaming the victims*
- *build trust by making our places of worship safe places to disclose about domestic violence; and receive responsible, caring help*
- *avoid forcing premature forgiveness*
- *be gentle, patient and accepting*
- *offer comfort; and,*
- *be willing to work together with other agencies for the sake of the victim.*

### **Residual effects of abuse**

Some effects of domestic violence may be characterized by:

The presence of domestic violence may also leave victims with:

**(1)** an impaired sense of security, **(2)** a distorted view of reality, **(3)** a loss of identity, **(4)** impaired self-worth, and a sense of feeling devalued, **(5)** a deep sense of false shame, **(6)** and being betrayed or rejected by God, the faith community, the justice system and social services.

Several years ago, we received a call from a victim of domestic violence. She was in a shelter and also reached out for spiritual help. After several months of walking with her through her journey, she left the shelter. She said: "I experienced the loss of someone I once loved. I lost trust. However, journaling it helped me see how I grew after I was out of the abuse. I used the Bible and the promises I read in it and now, as I look back and read my journal, I see how God helped me and how much I have grown."

She also said: "Women and men have to acknowledge that the violence on television and the pornography brought into the home are often taken out on the partner." She added: "The damage is oftentimes not reversible. Once you see a hand raised, you keep wondering when the next slug will come. I thought if I kept the kids quiet, the house clean and worked hard to keep from setting him off, everything would be okay... but it wasn't."

A victim's life is changed forever. The wounding is at the deepest level of the heart and soul. Victims are left permanently scarred. However, the good news is that God desires to restore the one who is wounded and broken. The prophet Isaiah declared in chapter sixty-one that He has come to bind up the broken-hearted and to bring freedom to the one who has been in captivity, including being a 'captive' to an abuser. (Isaiah 61:1)

### **The Response of the Faith Community**

Domestic abuse is not a new crime. It has existed for centuries and, sadly, historically it has not been handled well in the faith community.

Earlier I mentioned that domestic abuse is a crime of power and control. It is a crime of the powerful over the power-less. One classic example of this is seen in the story of Tamar, the daughter of King David in 2 Samuel 13. Tamar was abused by her half brother Amnon. She pleaded with him not to dishonor her, but his response was to throw her out of the house treating her like 'used and damaged goods.'

Tamar was devastated because according to the society of ancient Israel, she was no longer worthy to be married. Then, we see the ripple effect of what Amnon did when Absalom, David's favorite son, legitimized the crime by telling Tamar in verse 20 "be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart." The **power-full** brothers disregarded the dignity of their **power-less** sister. Absalom appeared to care more about the family reputation 'he is your brother' rather than care about his sister who had been violated. King David also failed to stop the abuse in his home.

Like so many clergy and denominations today, David endeavored to sweep it under the carpet thinking it would just go away. Remember, **sweeping things under the carpet eventually destroys the carpet!**

In order for the faith community to properly respond to domestic violence, we, as pastors, leaders and laity, should have:

Some of the most successful interventions that I have been involved in were those where there was a collaborative response to a victim's cry for help. We were unified in our goal – **to help the victim**. Case conferencing helped us assist and direct the victim through a difficult time; **and**, it also prevented the victim from engaging in triangulation and playing one of us against the other.

The prophet Jeremiah said that to know God is to uphold justice for the oppressed. Jeremiah 22:13-16. The authors of "Battered Into Submission" said, "Throughout the Old Testament a knowledge of God is frequently demonstrated by a commitment to justice and compassion for the needy (Isa. 1:11-17; 42:5-7; Jer. 9:23)"

If clergy in the faith community fail to uphold justice, then according to Ezekiel 34, shepherds/leaders will be held accountable for the way they have cared or failed to care for those entrusted to their care.

The church also has an obligation to hold people responsible for their wickedness, Psalm 10:15. And, Malachi 2:16 says that God hates those who cover violence.

In cases of family violence, the first obligation of the church is to **get victims to safety - not save the marriage**. While we, as members of the faith community, embrace the sanctity of marriage, when there is domestic violence, we must recognize and accept that the marriage is already shattered by these violent acts.

After professional intervention and counseling, we *might* be able to look at whether or not the family can be reunited and the marriage re-established. If the family system is flawed and shattered and one or both partners do not want to honor Christ's design for marriage, then the marriage may not be repairable. However, emotionally wounded people can be healed and we must be there to help them restructure their fractured lives through professional counseling as well as prayer and support.

At Centre Street Church, we also respond to abuse by having the following information available for victims of domestic violence:

Other **practical things** that clergy and leaders in the faith community can do to help victims:

Let me add another one to this list:

In order for our places of worship to be a safe place for a victim, we, as clergy, must:

As clergy, we have an awesome responsibility and duty before God to care for those God entrusts to us. And, as clergy, we can offer hope to victims and give them the assurance that the light of Christ can and will shine once again on the darkness of their soul.

As a child, I was victimized by a neighbor. Culturally I was silenced for years; however, when someone told me about the healing presence of Jesus to bind up the deepest wounds of my life, a light of hope shone into the dark chambers of my soul. To this day one of the most comforting portions of scripture is Isaiah 42:3-6.

*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope."*

*This is what God the LORD says—he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:*

*"I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; **I will take hold of your hand.** I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,*

*As clergy, we represent the hand of God. May we care for victims in a way that honors the integrity of the word of God and His kingdom purposes. And, may our hands reach out to help victims find help, hope and healing by responding with a collaborative approach so that victims are adequately and responsibly cared for.*

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**Resources:**

- *Statistics Canada, Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2003*
- *The Purple Packet: Mennonite Central Committee, 134 Plaza Drive, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3T 5K9.*
- *The Centre for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, 1914 N.34th Street, Suite 105, Seattle, WA. 98103.*

- *Battered Into Submission*, James & Phyllis Alsdurf, InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Illinois
- *The Church's Response to Family Violence*; Dr. Lois Mitchell, c/o Atlantic Baptist, P.O. Box 756, Kentville, Nova Scotia, B4N 3X9.
- *Battered Women: From a Theology of Suffering to an Ethic of Empowerment*; Bussert, Joy M.K.; New York: Lutheran Church in America; Division for Mission in North America, 1986.
- *Pastoral Care of Battered Women*, Rita-Lou Clarke; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986.
- *FaithLink. Turn Off The Violence. Hope and Healing: Domestic Violence Resources for the Church (2004-2007)*

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[http://www.theraveproject.com/index.php/resources/resource/domestic\\_violence\\_the\\_response\\_of\\_the\\_church/](http://www.theraveproject.com/index.php/resources/resource/domestic_violence_the_response_of_the_church/)