

Include Religious Leaders as Part of the Collaborative Community Response to Domestic Violence

Top Ten Reasons to Include Religious Leaders as Part of the Collaborative Community Response to Domestic Violence.

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I am often asked the question by those working within the criminal justice system why they should consider adding religious leaders to the collaborative community response to domestic violence. For many police investigators, parole or probation officers, lawyers, victim advocates and judges, the ordained representatives of religious institutions—such as clergy, rabbis, pastors and spiritual elders—contribute to the problem rather than the solution. Can that be changed?

These are my top-ten reasons for inviting religious leaders to the table.

1. Religious leaders are chosen by many victims.

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 domestic violence. For many women who are religious, a first response to abuse by an intimate partner is to seek out help from their pastor or other faith leader. The advice that is received will in large measure determine her next steps. Is she believed? Is she offered referral suggestions? Is she told to pursue only a spiritual response to her pain? Is safety held as a first priority? Since religious leaders are often chosen by victims, a community response must include input from various faith traditions in order to meet the needs of all people who live in our neighbourhoods. Religious women can be especially vulnerable when abused for they are very likely to hold the intact family in high esteem and to consider separation and divorce as unsatisfactory options.

2. Religious leaders are sought out by many perpetrators when the victim leaves the home.

When an abused religious woman seeks refuge in a transition house or shelter, it is not uncommon for the abuser to call his pastor for help. Sometimes he will use religious language in an attempt to convince the religious leader that he is sorry for his abusive deeds. Other times, he will tell the minister or rabbi of the extravagant gifts he has bought his wife, or the many tears he has shed, or how much he loves her. For some abusive men, this contact with a religious leader is part of their manipulative plan to have their partner return home. Yet, our research reveals that when religious leaders take seriously their role in encouraging abusive men to seek help, they are more likely to comply with attendance requirements in a batterer intervention program. While program attendance cannot guarantee change, intervention programs are an important part of any coordinated community response to domestic violence. Religious leaders are part of the team to ensure ongoing accountability in the lives of religious men who are, or have been, abusive.

3. Religious leaders are invested with moral authority.

In many religious traditions, the leaders—whether they are ordained or work in a lay capacity—hold considerable sway over other followers. As a result, when a religious leader

says that “abuse is wrong” it has a strong impact. In fact, many religious victims feel abandoned by their faith tradition when crisis strikes in the family. When a pastor or priest is able to use the language of the faith tradition to support a victim through her struggle, her journey towards healing has been augmented. Similarly, when a minister or other faith leader holds a religious abuser accountable for his behaviour, it enhances the coordinated community response to violence at home.

4. **Religious leaders have access to many lives at the point of crisis.**

When crisis strikes a nation, people often pray. When a tragedy occurs, faith leaders are often called in to explain the unexplainable. There is no doubt that for many men and women there is a close link between personal crisis and looking to their faith tradition for answers. Since religious leaders are uniquely positioned as crisis interveners, it is imperative that they are included in any community-based response to domestic violence. Not all members of the community will desire assistance from faith leaders when abuse occurs, but for those that do, it is critical that such help be made available. It is critical too for religious leaders to be well informed about other community-based services. Referrals between resource providers are essential.

5. **Religious leaders provide educational resources to all age groups.**

Congregations across this nation provide resources to a variety of age groups. Consider for example the role of Sunday School classes, youth group activities, young mom’s morning out, men’s groups, senior’s events, marriage preparation classes, summer camps, and so on. Clergy are called upon at various stages of the life course and are positioned therefore to offer much needed support for ensuring that every family is safe. I often use the slogan, “There is no place like home... When abuse strikes, there is no home.” Providing appropriate resources that clearly state that violence is wrong is something every faith leader can do.

6. **Religious leaders are regarded by many as experts on “marriage” and the family.**

Most highly religious people choose to be married in a service that “blesses” their union. Many religious leaders hold classes for marriage preparation, while others meet privately with those wishing to be married in church-sanctioned services. This provides a unique opportunity for religious leaders to speak clearly and honestly about abuse. They can state what marriage should be and offer suggestions if the reality of married life deviates from that ideal. We have learned from many abused religious women that they sought the help of the pastor who married them when abuse became their reality. Since many faith traditions celebrate “family values” it is imperative that the leaders speak out when abuse becomes the reality of family life. A coordinated community response needs to include these voices.

7. **Religious leaders are able to offer spiritual comfort and guidance.**

Vested with credibility by their own religious traditions, pastors and other spiritual leaders offer comfort and guidance that is distinct from the assistance offered in community-based agencies. As religious leaders, they speak the language of the spirit—using the sacred texts, prayers and other rituals inherent in their various traditions. The impact of this form of empowerment upon followers who are victims of DV cannot be overstated. Yet, breaking the cycle of violence in families of faith often requires both the input of secular culture and support from their religious community and its leadership.

8. **Religious leaders are often in regular contact with those who are marginalized.** The prophets of old highlighted the importance of attending to the needs and circumstances of the poor. Some have even suggested that God has a preferential option for those who are marginalized or oppressed. To be sure, contemporary congregations across the nation fall short of the mandate to care for those who are vulnerable. Yet, religious leaders and the congregations they lead offer a range of resources—practical and emotional in nature—which respond to human need. Marginalized men and women continue to look to churches and other religious organizations for help. Whether their needs are met is another matter, of course.
9. **Religious leaders are able to provide ongoing support after the crisis.** Justice, accountability and change are all central ingredients in the intervention services offered to men who have abused their wives. Although some come voluntarily, other men are mandated by the courts or referred by their wives, therapists, or clergy to participate in an intervention program for abusers. Woven through the narratives of abusive men who are traveling toward justice and accountability are the roles of religious congregations and their leaders in supporting the men as they seek help. A pastor or priest is a key player in ensuring accountability in the life of a religious man who is, or has been, abusive. Consequently, houses of worship and religious leaders are unique resources in any community-based efforts to create safe and peaceful homes. While the role of the religious professional in responding to the needs of the abused has been recognized for some time, it is important to realize that there is also a role for religious leaders in helping abusive religious men become accountable and to walk with them on their journey towards changed thinking and behaviour.
10. **Religious leaders are skilled in talking about hope.** There are specific religious contours both to the abuse that is suffered by people of deep faith and to the healing journey. As a result, many in the secular therapeutic community do not like to work with clients who are particularly religious. Without spiritual credentials, these workers find it difficult to challenge the religious ideation that is believed by the victim or perpetrator to give license to abuse. For collaborative ventures between churches and community agencies to be successful—what I like to call paving the pathway between the steeple and the shelter—personnel from both paradigms must recognize the need to work together to end violence. A cultural language that is devoid of religious symbols, meanings, and legitimacy is relatively powerless to alter a religious victim’s resolve to staying the marriage no matter what the cost. Correspondingly, the language of the spirit, if devoid of the practical resources of contemporary culture, compromises a victim’s need for safety, security, and financial resources to care for herself and her children.

Building Bridges involves collaboration. Choose carefully with whom you will work, because specific skills, training and commitment are required. Not all religious leaders are equipped equally to join with other community agencies in a coordinated response to end domestic violence and to offer support to all those impacted by abuse.

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