



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

*By: Grant L. Martin*

It was 10 p.m. Kirstin, overwhelmed with pain and fear, was sitting at the kitchen table. 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 their only car after another one of their “family squabbles,” as he called them.

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

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

Consider the following facts: Persons killing their spouses account for 15 to 20 percent of all murders committed in the United States. The FBI estimates that in this country a wife is beaten every 15 to 30 seconds. 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 have reported that their husbands or boyfriends have abused them. 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 spousal abuse appears to take an equally damaging toll within the church community. A national survey completed several years ago by the Seattle Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence found that typical clergy see almost 14 people each year whose problems involve 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 spousal abuse.

The anguish of thousands of desperate people can be described by the words of David: “My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me” (Psalm 55:4,5). While the vast majority of victims are women, there is some evidence that men are also abused. One study estimated that 3.5 million women and 250,000 men are battered by their spouses or intimate partners. 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 the 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 non-verbal behavior.

### Phases of Violence

A predictable progression of events seems to continually repeat itself in an abusive relationship. The first phase is a time of tension building. Irritations over things such as discipline and finances may lead to a feeling of walking on eggshells. Regardless of the wife's efforts to avoid confrontations, the crisis phase is inevitable.

The second phase starts when acute violence begins. This is when the batterer unleashes his aggressive behavior on 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, a period of relative calm follows. 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 the violence will never happen again. This behavior often comes from a genuine sense of guilt over the harm he inflicted, as well as the fear of losing his spouse. The husband or boyfriend may really believe he will never allow himself to be violent again. The wife wants 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 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 pastoral involvement need to 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 situations, 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, and commute to work)?
- Do you ever feel isolated and alone, as if there were no one with whom you could confide?
- Is he overly critical of daily things, such as your cooking, clothes, or appearance?
- Do his moods change radically from calm to angry, or vice versa?
- Does he ever strike you with his hands or feet (slap, punch, or kick), 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, or 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, call you names, convey insults, or make threats?

If the wife answers yes to two or more of these questions, she may be living in an abusive situation. The violence will not 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 they 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 spousal 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 does not want her to remain in a situation where her life and the lives of her children are in danger.
- Be trustworthy and calm. The victim needs reassurance, support, and hope, but do not pressure her to talk about the abuse.
- Let her know it is likely that, in spite of his promises, the violence will continue and probably escalate.
- Make sure she knows she is not alone — millions of American women from every ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic group suffer from abuse, and 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 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. Do not put her name on a prayer list, or give information to elders or other church leaders.
- Help the victim take inventory of her situation. Assess the level of harm and danger to herself and the children.
- Give her 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 programs, 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, and health insurance documents.

- Suggest that her husband needs treatment. He needs to take responsibility for, and change his behavior.
- Pressing charges may be appropriate. Domestic violence is a crime. 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. Prayer is 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.

- 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 her 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 has 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 ensure the abuser is held accountable for his actions, often in cooperation with the legal system, in the process of restoring the person and assisting him 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 — the victim who struggles with hopelessness, the perpetrator who carries insecurity and shame, the children who are preoccupied with fear and apprehension, and 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.

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