

Religious communities: Are we a resource or roadblock in ending violence against women?

The answer to that question is as varied as the many faces of women who have been or are currently victims of domestic or sexual violence. Many women have been supported by their faith community and clergy in their quest for safety. Hearing that the violence is not her fault, no one deserves to be abused, and that nothing within religion entitles men to abuse women, provides a resource to safety.

Other women's experiences have had tragic endings, resulting in further violence. Hearing that "a good Christian wife should submit to her husband", that "shalom bayit is her responsibility", or that "this is her cross to bear", creates tremendous roadblocks to her safety.

Simply stated, faith communities have a vital role and responsibility to end violence against women, in individual lives as well as within communities. Within that framework, religion and religious leaders, through their moral voice and authority, have the ability to shape safe, non-violent, healthy families and communities.

Through unique access to individuals, religious leaders can provide information, support, and referrals to victims. Religious leaders can direct the accountability of violence to perpetrators who are counting on the silence of victims and our society to maintain the status quo. With no other issue has the clergy role of "informed generalist" been more crucial to individuals and society.

How can we begin to be a resource?

Studies show that often the first place a victim of domestic violence will turn for help is her religious community or a religious leader. At that point, it's important to understand the goals of serving as a resource:

- 1. Safety for the victim**
- 2. Accountability for the perpetrator, including rehabilitation**
- 3. Creating a climate that supports non-violence in interpersonal relationships and our communities**

Any attempt at reconciliation can only be accomplished AFTER the first two goals have been achieved and if both parties are mutually agreeable and free from pressure, coercion, or manipulation. If we begin with an attempt at reconciliation, without long-term change and accountability for the perpetrator, we are sending an abused woman and her children into an unsafe situation. In fact, it may be even more dangerous if she has "broken the silence" and enlisted the help of others.

Is our community/congregation a safe place? Do we know where we are headed?

Perhaps a more appropriate question to ask is ... are we a caring community in our response to domestic violence? Consider the following checklist by Nancy Nason-Clark, co author of *No Place for Abuse* –

- Is a safety mechanism in place?
- Do members know staff of community shelter programs?
- Is information available in SAFE locations?
- Has the congregation asked the local shelter (or domestic violence project) about its needs?
- Is dating violence discussed in the youth group?
- Is abuse discussed in pre-marital counseling?
- Has a sermon been preached that condemns abuse in the home?

In addition, you might ask:

- Do we have an action plan should someone disclose abuse, whether it be a victim or batterer?
- Is domestic violence discussed in adult study groups or prayer circles?
- Have we, as a congregation, denomination, or faith pledged to stand against domestic violence with the goals of safety for the victim and accountability for the perpetrator?
- Have clergy, key staff, and/or lay leaders received training on domestic violence?
- Are we ready to identify ways to become more responsive?

See Appendix J for more information on readying your congregation to respond to domestic violence.

Taking an honest look at the answers to these questions will help you decide a plan of action. In addition, assess key people needed within your congregation to move forward.

While we encourage congregations to use their moral authority and influence to speak out against domestic violence, we also encourage congregations to plan for disclosure. Victims of domestic violence are looking for safe, confidential people and places for help. When a congregation or clergy begins speaking out against violence against women, it will surely be followed by calls for help. This manual will offer you clear and safe ways to be a lifeline for victims, as well as for perpetrators.

Why a policy on domestic violence?

In addition to an assessment of your congregation, a thoughtful and productive response to domestic violence may include working through any administrative or policy making bodies within your faith community. Policy allows for everyone to “be on the same page” when implementing responses. In the case of domestic violence, a clear policy could literally mean the difference between life or death, safety or harm, resource or roadblock.

Remember, at all times, safety and confidentiality for the victim and her children remain the top priority.

Sample Domestic Violence Policy Statement for Congregations

We, the people of _____, stand as a congregation/community against domestic violence.

We recognize domestic violence is a learned behavior and a choice, used to control an intimate partner. It includes physical, sexual, psychological/emotional, verbal, and economic abuse.

We recognize domestic violence as a crime, as well as a sin. We state clearly that violence against women and children, inside or outside of the home is never justified. We condemn the use of the scripture or other religious tenants and traditions to support abusive behavior in any form. We recognize that violence and abuse break the covenant of marriage, not divorce.

We recognize our role as a resource not a roadblock for victims and support the following priorities as a basis for planning:

1. Safety for victims
2. Accountability for perpetrators, including rehabilitation
3. Creating a climate that supports non-violence in interpersonal relationships and our communities

We will strive to create an environment that is safe for victims. We will take active measures to support and refer victims to local domestic violence programs. We will keep all requests for assistance in confidence. We respect the authority and autonomy of victims to direct their own lives.

In addition,

We accept our unique role in creating and sustaining healthy, non-violent families and safe, non-violent communities.

We embrace our unique role in speaking out against domestic violence and educating our congregation about non-violent, healthy relationships.

We will build a partnership between our congregation and the local domestic violence/sexual assault program.

APPROVAL

Appropriate Signature

Date

Adapted from FaithTrust Institute, March 2003 Newsletter

Self care for responders ... how do I know if I said or did the right thing?

DO ...

Talk about and process your feelings and experience. You'll learn and continue to become more comfortable in your responses.

Respect the woman's need for safety and confidentiality.

Utilize your local domestic violence/sexual assault program's 24-hour crisis line so as to keep confidentiality.

DON'T ...

Share information from her with other people. It is never appropriate to share any identifying information in a public place or with others in your congregation, family members, staff members, or any other people.

Domestic violence is a difficult subject to address. Taking the time to listen, support, and share concerns for safety is an important step in validating a victim's experience. Remember to take care of yourself as well.

Confidentiality is crucial to the safety of the victim and her children. A breach of confidentiality may result in dire consequences for the woman and her children.

The only exception to confidentiality is when mandated by law to make a report of child abuse and neglect or when a person threatens harm to themselves or others. Further information is provided in this manual.

How can religious communities and local domestic violence programs work together?

There are many suggestions for working together in Section VI of this manual; anywhere from education and training possibilities to providing foster care for pets so a woman and her children may go into shelter. The first step, however, and of critical importance, is to start building partnerships with your local program **BEFORE** a crisis situation happens in your congregation or community. Also -

- Educate yourself and others in your congregation about domestic violence and appropriate responses.
- Ask staff from your local program to make presentations at adult education or study classes. Ask for brochures to display in the church/synagogue/mosque.
- Offer to visit with staff at the local project, always clarifying that no religious tradition condones violence against women.
- Offer to provide Bibles, candles or other religious elements to shelters for their religious residents, as well as donating funds to be used for non-religious purposes.
- Respect and appreciate your local project's staff as they are dedicated individuals who usually have a calling of their own that inspires their work and caring.
- Offer support by writing testimonial letters for grants, other fundraising projects and legislative initiatives that protect women from domestic and sexual violence.