

SUGGESTED RELIGIOUS RESPONSES

"For all the classes I had in family living, counseling, psychology and the like, no one in Bible college had prepared me to help a woman with black eyes, broken ribs, and a concussion from her violent husband." (1)

Introduction

The most important first step for clergy is *to recognize that domestic violence exists* with greater frequency than you may have assumed, even within your own religious community. The battered woman is in your congregation, however well she or her abuser may attempt to conceal that presence. Within your congregation there are also batterers. There are also children witnessing, or themselves enduring, violence in their homes on a regular basis. For these reasons, it is important that clergy learn how to recognize and deal with domestic violence.

The second most important step in your efforts to help is to understand and to declare that domestic violence is a crime and will not be tolerated. The worship service, although approached from various theological perspectives, provides clergy with an opportunity to speak to issues which concern the gathered religious community and to relate these to their faith and tradition. Thus an entire community can be made more aware of issues of domestic violence and encouraged to respond in ways that will help the victims, batterers and their families who are experiencing violence.

Sample services and sermons are available in several of the books or manuals on domestic violence listed in the bibliography (pp. 146, 147) or are available from denominational resources.

(1) James M. Nichols, *Wounded in the House of My Friends, Spouse Abuse: Can the Church Cope?*

Guidelines for Clergy (1)

When a woman comes to you for help or you suspect there may be violence in the home, there are some specific things to keep in mind. Problems associated with domestic violence are difficult to work through. Usually patterns of abuse have existed for a long time, and unless you are a professionally trained counselor, you should not enter into a long-term counseling or therapy situation. You are in a unique position to relate and minister to all parties and these pastoral relationships need to be preserved.

The response of clergy and laity to the religious crisis caused by domestic violence can be a great resource for victims. The following guidelines may prove helpful; however, as a clergy person, you need to be aware that the life of the victim may be in immediate danger and safety is the first concern.

1. Ask the question. Women rarely come in and announce they have been battered. Women may come for counseling and speak in terms that are general or vague. Develop some ways that you are comfortable with for asking specific questions such as, "Are you in danger?" "What does he do when he gets angry?" "Are you worried about the safety of you and your children?" Listen to the woman and understand her situation; uncover abuse; recognize panic and fear. Take seriously her assessment of a life-threatening situation and the potential danger of her from her husband's violence. Do not discount her fears that he may try to kill her if she leaves, or that if she stays she may end up dead.

2. Believe her! Battered women will often be telling you the minimal truth, not an exaggerated version. There are many things a battered woman fears and fear of not being believed is a strong one. This fear will be compounded in religious settings when her husband chairs a board, sings in the choir or is a "pillar of the community," all of which are very likely. It is important for her to break the silence by describing what is happening to her. Telling you the story is embarrassing for her. She is not likely to exaggerate.

3. Listen to her and affirm her feelings. It is crucial that clergy respond with affirmation and without judgment to a battered woman. Let her be your teacher and educator. You be a listener. Listen without assigning blame.

Active and respectful listening may be more important than giving theological answers. Listening carefully and attentively can help you discern what is important to *the person in crisis*. The important

thing is to learn, from inside the victim's own theology, what will be helpful to her for her safety and well-being. You can discuss theological differences when the person is not in crisis.

4. Unequivocally challenge violence. It is often difficult for victims of domestic violence to come forward because of our tendency to "victimize the victim." It is important to state clearly that violence is not acceptable and not ask a woman questions such as "What did you do to provoke him?" A battered woman is not responsible for the violence in her relationship. Confront her with the reality of the situation: she can't make him stop and neither can you. She can, however, declare that she will leave if he does it again, or that she will not come back until he gets help.

Support faith statements that address the victim's safety, well-being and empowerment. A victim may say, "I believe that God never sends us anything we can't handle." This sincere belief may be both an obstacle and an opportunity. On the one hand, it implies that God has sent this abuse, that it is God's will, that we must put up with and endure the "cross that God has seen fit to lay upon us." This first implication could stand in the way of the victim's safety. On the other hand, it also implies that God knows this person has resources for dealing with the abusive situation. It may be more helpful to affirm this part of the statement and say, "Let's name the resources you think God has given you to deal with it."

5. Encourage her to find a safe place for herself if she is in physical danger. Such a place could be the home of a friend or relative, a shelter, a motel or a church-family refuge.

6. Offer the woman alternatives from which to choose. Her vision may be so clouded from a life of abuse that she may not be able to see her options. Some of these options may be individual counseling, career counseling, support groups, education, separation, help for the battered, divorce or legal aid or counsel.

7. It is extremely important that a battered woman make her own choices and make them in her own time. Support her even if you disagree with her decision. If she decides to stay in the relationship, it is appropriate to share with her your concern for her safety and to discuss ways she can increase her safety. It is not appropriate for you to tell her what she has to do or should do. Beware of your tendency to want to rescue the woman. It is imperative for her to make her own choices: whether to stay or to leave, and how to do it.

8. Help her discover and develop her own resources: money, friends, relatives, employment, stress reduction. Encourage her to make contact with the nearest shelter.

9. Confront what is happening to any children who are involved in this relationship. Are they being abused by either her husband or her? Does she want this kind of future for them? Sometimes concern for the welfare of her children can motivate a woman to act. In many states there is a legal obligation to report any known child abuse.

10. Have it as your goal to involve her in a domestic violence program as soon as possible. In addition, a woman counselor or lay leader or women's group can provide further support she may need to deal with her situation.

11. Continue to support her. It is important that you not give a battered woman resources and then exit the scene, particularly if she has been an active member of your congregation. Maintain contact by checking with her periodically to see how she is doing and offer more information on resources.

12. Assure confidentiality. Let her know that you will not discuss this matter with anyone else without her permission. Agree that you will not call on her at home and bring up the subject. Doing either of these may increase her danger as well as increase her fear and distrust.

13. Confronting the abuser. Any information shared by a victim about her assailant's behavior must be considered confidential in order to guard her safety. Clinical experience suggests that confrontation with abusers by untrained practitioners may endanger victims and should be avoided at all costs.

If the abuser confronts you, remember he may vehemently deny any wrongdoing and may not even be able to remember the episodes of violence. You will need to be patient with him, yet unrelenting in your statements that the violence must cease today. The abuser may have a long history of violence in

his own family and will need help in seeing his behavior clearly and beginning to identify the patterns of violence in his life. This should be a learning process to effect change and NOT an exercise in finding excuses for the violent behavior. There is no short term solution to a life of violence, therefore it should be your goal to involve him in a batterer's program as soon as possible. It is just as important for you to maintain contact with the abuser to offer hope and support as it is for you to support the victim.

14. Individual counseling is usually the only option. Unless the violence has completely stopped *and* the man has gone through a batterer's program, couples counseling could increase the level of violence a woman experiences. She faces the fact that if she talks about the situation she will be beaten later, and not being able to talk about the situation nullifies the counseling process. The immediate goal is not to save the marriage, but to stop the violence.

15. Give her the gift of time and be prepared for frustration. A battered woman needs time to sort through a lot of religious, social, emotional and economic issues. She deserves time and patience from you as she does this. She will know when the time is right for her to act. Provide support and help her rebuild her sense of self-worth, self-confidence and the belief that she can make it on her own. Respectfully offer alternatives to faith statements that are keeping victims trapped. A good way to do this is to make "I" statements. If you say, "I am confident that God does not want you to suffer," or "I do not believe that God is punishing you for sin" you may be heard as offering possibilities to victims, rather than shaming and blaming them for believing the wrong thing.

Connected with ideas of sin may be the victim's feeling that she must forgive the abuser and stay in the abusive situation. Respectfully suggest that if abuse is ongoing, it means that the abuser has not repented and that therefore forgiveness is not appropriate. You may suggest that forgiveness is the end, not the beginning, of the healing process. You may suggest that forgiveness is up to God, not up to the victim.

16. Refer! Refer! Refer! Domestic violence affects the entire family. Many local domestic violence programs have professionals who will work with the women, the children and the abusers. Domestic violence does not stop by itself. Children who grow up witnessing violence are likely to become victims and abusers.

(1) Much of the material used in these guidelines has been adapted from: Bussert, Joy M.K., *Battered Women: From a Theology of Suffering to an Ethic of Empowerment*, suggestions offered by Pellauer, Mary, "Ministry of Abusive Families," Vol. 16. *Family Resources*, 2900 Queen Lane, Philadelphia, PA: Division for Parish Services, Lutheran Church of America, and from Clark, Rita-Lou, *Pastoral Care of Battered Women*.